

# **RADICAL ISLAM: ITS ROOTS, IDEOLOGY AND SUPPORTERS**

© ANDY BANNISTER 2005

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

In the last 20 years or so or so, the issue of terrorism, violence and Islam is one with which we have been increasingly confronted. The 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. 9/11. Bali. Madrid. Attacks in Saudi Arabia.

### **1.1 *Radical Islam or only one, multi-faceted Islam?***

The complex issue of Islam and terrorism raises a number of important questions. Is Islam inherently violent? Are the radicals an aberration, or do they represent a voice of authentic Islam? How numerous are Islamic radicals? What exactly do they want? How should Christians respond?

### **1.2 *Moderate voices, radical voices***

The problem is that to answer that question we really need to listen to what Muslims are saying, rather than impose our views from without. And when we tune in, what we hear are a range of different voices. Here are some moderate voices:

*Those who plan and carry out such acts [as 9/11] are condemned by Islam.*<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Zaki Badawi, Thought for the Day Sept 13 2003

*There is no such thing as an Islamic terrorist.*

Iqbal Sacranie, Jan 13 2005

*When atrocities such as the recent bombings in Saudi Arabia and Turkey are being carried out in the name of Islam, it becomes a great responsibility upon us, as upholders of the true and enlightening message of the Prophets of God, to counteract through our words and deeds this gross distortion of the noble, dignifying message of Islam.*

Inayat Bunglawala, 5 Dec 2003

All very well and good, but then one might contrast such messages of peace and tolerance with:

*The real weapons of mass destruction are the desire for martyrdom. Millions of you are ready to be shaheed [martyrs]. Half a million martyrdom shaheed is enough for Muslims to control the whole of earth forever. In the end of the day, Islam must control the earth, whether we like it or not.*<sup>2</sup>

Abu Hamza

*Jihad, beloved brother, is a powerful, invigorating yearning for Islam's might and glory, - an intense, overwhelming desire for Islam's golden days, its strength and its pride.*

Hassan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim brotherhood.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Peter G. Riddell and Peter Cotterell, *Islam in Context*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003) 183.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in *The Evening Standard*, 26 April 2004

<sup>3</sup> Cited by the *Young Muslims UK* website (www.ymuk.net)

*There is a whole surah [chapter in the Qur'an] called 'Spoils of War'. There is no surah called 'Peace'. Jihad and killing are the head of Islam. If you take them out, you cut off the head of Islam.*  
Omar Abdel Rahman, then Lecturer at Al-Azhar University, 1980.<sup>4</sup>

In short, there is an internal debate within Islam over precisely this issue. Yet tempting as it is to simply lump Muslims into two groups, moderates and radicals, it is questionable whether this is helpful. Here, for example, is a statement from the Muslim Council of Britain, a UK umbrella body usually considered to represent 'moderate' Islam:

The use of such terms as 'moderates' and 'extremists' should be avoided as this would create division and polarization.<sup>5</sup>

This is fascinating because it suggests that, at least in the eyes of influential groups like the MCB, Muslim unity comes above division into factions. Furthermore, moderates and radicals have a lot in common: both would claim, for example, to be following the same sources of authority, namely the Qur'an, the *sunna* and the *hadith*. My argument is this: **what we are faced with is one, multi-faceted Islam that allows for a variety of interpretations.** The problem for the moderates, however, is that the traditional way of interpreting those ancient texts tend to make it easier for the radicals.

## 2. RADICAL ISLAM AND THE ISLAMIC SOURCES

### 2.1 The centrality of the Qur'an and *hadith*

It is almost impossible to overstate the importance of the Qur'an in popular Muslim piety. Muslims hold it much higher than the majority of Christians hold the Bible, simply because what they predicate of it is different. For Christians, the Bible is the Word of God in the sense that it contains a report of God's words and dealings with his people. For Muslims, the Qur'an is, ontologically, the very Word of God. Mainstream, orthodox Islam has always and continues to hold that the Qur'an was uncreated.

As the Muslim scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr puts it:

The Word of God in Islam is the Qur'an; in Christianity it is Christ ... The form of the Qur'an is the Arabic language which religiously speaking is as inseparable from the Qur'an as the body of Christ is from Christ Himself.<sup>6</sup>

What then does the Qur'an have to say on the question of violence, of *jihad*? Just as we heard differing Muslim voices, so too the Qur'an speaks with several voices.

### 2.2 Peaceful verses, violent verses

Let's start with the positive, a verse that promotes peace and tolerance.

Say: O disbelievers!  
I worship not that which ye worship;

---

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Mark A. Gabriel, *Islam and Terrorism*, (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2002) 24.

<sup>5</sup> 'Statement of British Imams and Scholars on the September 11 Tragedy and its Aftermath', 29 September 2001, Muslim Council of Britain website: <http://www.mcb.org.uk/ulama.html>

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Norman L. Geisler and Norman Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in the Light of the Cross*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993) 98.

Nor worship ye that which I worship.  
And I shall not worship that which ye worship.  
Nor will ye worship that which I worship.  
Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion.  
Q. 109:1-6

Similar sentiments are expressed by Q. 2:256:

Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out  
clear from Error.  
Q. 2:256

These verses are often quoted to show that Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance. Live and let live, don't force your views on another person, even if they wrong.

There are many, many other verses whose sentiments seem to be those of peace and tolerance. Some scholars estimate there are over 100 such verses in the Qur'an. So far, so good. But the problem is that the Qur'an speaks with another message:

But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the  
Pagans wherever ye find them, seize them, beleaguer them, and lie  
in wait for them in every stratagem (of war); but if they repent,  
and establish regular prayers and practise regular charity, then  
open the way for them: for Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful.  
Q. 9:5

Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. And those with him are violent  
against the disbelievers and merciful among themselves.  
Q. 48:29

Those who fight in *jihad* are promised a greater reward than those who do not: [OHP]

Not equal are those believers who sit (at home) and receive no  
hurt, and those who strive and fight in the cause of Allah  
[*mujahidu4n fi sabīl allah*] with their goods and their persons.  
Allah hath granted a grade higher to those who strive and fight  
with their goods and persons than to those who sit (at home). Unto  
all (in Faith) Hath Allah promised good: But those who strive and  
fight Hath He distinguished above those who sit (at home) by a  
special reward.  
Q. 4:95

Again, there are well over one hundred such verses in the Qur'an. This presents us with something of a problem — namely how to resolve the contradiction.

### 2.3 The doctrine of abrogation and the evolutionary concept of *jihad*/holy war

The issue of how to deal with contradictory and conflicting verses in the Qur'an was one faced by the classical scholars of Islam. The answer they derived was the classical doctrine of abrogation (*naskh*). This orthodox Islamic doctrine states that when this issue arises, one discerns when each verse was revealed in the career of Muhammad and follows the principle that verses which are revealed later supersede or abrogate the earlier verses. By careful use of sources outside of the Qur'an, the *hadith* and *sira*, classical exegetes worked out when each verse of the Qur'an was

revealed — which situation in the life of the prophet had seen its revelation. This allowed an order to be imposed on the Qur'an and these kinds of problems to be dealt with.

So what happens if we apply the doctrine of *naskh*, of abrogation, to the issue of the peaceful and violent verses in the Qur'an. Can we discern which verses are later and which verses are earlier? The answer is yes, we can. The peaceful verses are generally earlier and the violent verses later.

### **3. RADICAL ISLAM AND THE MODERN WORLD**

#### **3.1 Islam's four responses to the modern world**

Lying behind these multiple Muslim voices lies one major factor. One, then, is the issue of the Qur'an itself — how to interpret a diverse and complex text and apply it to the modern world. Does one follow the traditional, mainstream model of *naskh* (abrogation)? Does one apply an alternative hermeneutic? Whatever route one takes, this tension between violent and peaceful verses needs to be resolved. Many moderates try to argue that the violent verses were restricted to the context they were revealed in. But if this is true, why are the peaceful verses not similarly restricted?

The issue of Islam and the modern world gives rise to a number of responses to that modern world. In short, Muslims — especially those living in western countries — have a choice. They can:<sup>7</sup>

- Blend in and assimilate
- Try to remain separate
- Attack the system
- Try to subvert the system

#### **3.2 Four responses, three types of group**

These four possible responses have given rise to a number of Muslim groups with widely differing agendas. Firstly, we have:

##### **3.2.1 Terrorist groups**

The most famous of these would be *Al Qaeda* itself, although separating it from other groups is difficult since it has always attempted to network itself with as many other terrorist groups as possible.<sup>8</sup> Other groups who have risen into the public eye especially since 9/11 include *Jemaah Islamiyah*, responsible for the Bali bombings in 2002.<sup>9</sup>

##### **3.2.2 Ideological groups**

Whilst the terrorist groups themselves so often have the focus, due to their high profile activities in the past and the threat they represent in the future, equally important to recognise are what one might term the ideological groups, those who, at least publicly, do not claim to directly engage in terrorism or violence but whose ideological help sows the seeds and keeps the ground fertile for the more active groups. There is a further symbiotic connection in that many of the groups I'm about to

---

<sup>7</sup> These four options are outlined in more detail in Peter G. Riddell, *Christians and Muslims: Pressures and Potential in a Post-9/11 World*, (Leicester: IVP, 2004) 61-87.

<sup>8</sup> For the best overview of Al Qaeda, see Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, (New York: Berkley Books, 2002)

<sup>9</sup> We are focussing here on what we might describe as *jihadi* groups with a *global* mindset, rather than, say, Islamic Jihad or Hamas, which tend to have an Israel-centric mindset. This is not to downplay the violent nature of these groups, but simply to bracket them out from those groups with wider horizons.

mention have been accused — quite rightly in my view — of providing recruits for the more dangerous *jihad* groups. In particular we might mention:

- The Muslim Brotherhood.

Founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna with the aim of promoting Islam as a complete way of life and the rejection of all man made systems, the group quickly developed a radical ideology that espoused *jihad* as a valid response both to the west and to apostate Muslim states. Among its members was the Islamic scholar Sayyid Qutb, whose commentary on the Qur'an is highly radical in places and extremely popular: *Milestones* can be found on the shelves of many a Muslim bookshop. Despite being implicated in the assassination attempt on Egyptian President Sadat in 1981, advocates of the group have always claimed they do not engage in violence. Today, the influence of the Brotherhood is worldwide.

- Hizb ut-Tahrir

Founded by **Sheikh Taqi-ud-deen Al-Nabahani in Palestine in 1951** who believed that the poor state of the Muslim *Ummah* was due to the destruction of the Caliphate in 1924. The groups stated aim is the re-establishment of the Caliphate and the overthrow of any non-Muslim systems of government, like the Brotherhood, its members claim to be non-violent. Despite this, it is banned across much of the Muslim World. Arguably this is not least because even if the group is truthful in not being violent itself, its teachings fuel and motivate those who *are*.

- Al-Muhajiroun

A spin-off from Hizb ut-Tahrir, this group was formed in 1983 by Sheikh Omar Bakri Mohammed, who was thrown out of Hizb ut-Tahrir (he himself claims they were diluting their teachings and were not radical enough). Traditionally they have had a strong UK presence. Bakri is clear that Islamic law is superior to Western law: because it is simpler and divine. (He says Western law only protects you if you understand it!)

On 9/11, he says 'they were magnificent terrorists'. He cites a hadith to support terrorism: The Prophet Muhammad once said to the enemy: I have come to terrorize you; he said: "O, people of Qureish I have come to slaughter you"; in another quote he said: 'I am the Prophet who kills while laughing'. Bakri sees Al-Qaeda as people who revived the memory and traditions of the Messenger Muhammad and his companions. In 2004, Bakri disbanded al-Muhajiroun, at least publicly. His teachings have become more radical since this, and he is currently under investigation for inciting hatred and violence.

So, then, we see a pattern. The ideological groups provide the theological underpinning and popular level support (witness how widely e.g. Qutb is read) for the actions of the extreme groups — which only a small minority of Muslims actively support or are involved in. But this does mean that when moderates protest that the radicals are only a "tiny minority of extremists", we need to be careful. The **activists** may be small in number, the **theorists** are more plentiful.

Finally, we have a third group that has arisen in recent years, the moderate umbrella organisations. These are groupings of so-called moderates who have come together to find strength in numbers, to lobby on a wide range of Muslim causes. Groups like CAIR in the USA, or the MCB in the UK would be good examples. They are groups that we need to be careful of, however:

- Much of what they say is helpful. Many moderate Muslims do genuinely despise the radicals and all that they stand for, yet do not know how really to oppose them. We want the moderates to win, so they need our support.

- However, groups like the MCB often spend more time **sitting on the fence** than it might at first appear, unwilling to go all the way in condemning radical thinking and ideology. For example, the MCB post-9/11 published a collection of essays called *The Quest for Sanity*. In its pages we find the **same call for the Caliphate**, albeit watered down, that echoes from the lips of groups like the Muslim Brotherhood.

With several “independent” Muslim states, Muslims are now even weaker, because their Muslim identity has been superseded by nationalistic or other divisive identities.<sup>10</sup>

- Secondly, groups like the MCB **fail to engage in any self-criticism**; in short, *Islam* itself can be in anyway the problem. Nor, it seems can traditional forms of interpretation. Here, again we read from the MCB:

To prove their respect for human rights, Muslims are told they must board the boat of modernity. The price they are expected to pay for this ride is to re-think their religious convictions or re-interpret their sacred texts so as to conform to international standards and universal values.<sup>11</sup>

- And, thirdly, groups like the MCB that seek to be an umbrella organisation for large numbers of other Muslim organisations can often end up with some **strange bedfellows**. For example, the MCB have the following among their 300 affiliates:

- Young Muslims UK, whose website proudly flags up an article on *jihad* by Hassan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>12</sup>
- The Islamic Forum Europe, who call on Muslims to be loyal primarily to each other, citing the Qur’an verse which speaks of not taking Jews and Christians as friends.
- The Islamic Society of Britain, whose website contains many attacks on the West, for example stating that ‘Western governments have little or no interest in democracy, freedom or justice’.
- Markazi Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith UK whose online *Path* magazine is full of anti-Jewish polemic; e.g. ‘today the Jews rule the world by proxy. They get others to fight and die for them’ and ‘One group of people who partake in propaganda campaigns are Jews ... who are well-known for their rebellion against the Creator and their attempts at killing Allah’s prophets’.<sup>13</sup>

Such affiliates suggest that either the MCB has been very careless about who it aligns itself with, or that its stance is not as moderate as it would have us believe.

Why this focus on a group like the MCB? Groups like the MCB is also dangerous because of the political and popular influence they wield, on the one hand playing down and attacking any suggestion that terrorist groups could be inspired by Islam, whilst on the other subtly pushing many

---

<sup>10</sup> M. Abdul Bari, ‘Muslim Identity in Britain Today’ in *The Quest for Sanity* (Wembley: Muslim Council of Britain, 2002) 177.

<sup>11</sup> Azzam Tamimi, ‘Human Rights: Islamic and Secular Perspectives’ in *The Quest for Sanity* (Wembley: Muslim Council of Britain, 2002) 231.

<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.ymuk.net/articles-02/?action=disparticle&id=9>.

<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.sirat-e-mustaqeem.com/eng-3.htm>

of the agendas of these very groups. In short, many groups like the MCB have demonstrably embraced a **subvert** model in their dealings with the west.

Furthermore, the more you read the writings of the so-called larger moderate groups, the more you realise they have failed to grasp that the problem lies within Islam, namely in the way that the violent groups and the ideological groups who feed them can draw on the core texts of Islam — especially the Qur'an, but also the *hadith* and *sira* to support their actions. This needs to be addressed head on, yet instead groups like the MCB prefer to constantly attack the west, deny there is a problem, blow smokescreens and duck the question. And the question is one of hermeneutics.

Here, I would suggest, are the options open to the moderates:

- The Jewish scholar Reuven Firestone has suggested that we reject the evolutionary model of holy war and say that instead the Qur'an represents different groups in early Islam, battling it out — moderates and radicals again. In the past, the radicals won out — witness the fact there are more violent verses. But Muslims could revisit this, he says, and reject the radical viewpoint. Problem: no orthodox Muslim could follow this, as they see the Qur'an as the very words of God, not the words of dissenting groups of humans.<sup>14</sup>
- Another option is to again reject the evolutionary model of holy war and say that Mecca represents the ideal form of Islam, Medina just one application of it. Thus we do not to overwrite Meccan peaceful texts with later Medinan peaceful ones. This faces a number of problems: one, it ignores 1,000 years of later tradition. Two, how can a peaceful model have a violent application as it did at Medina. Three, if the model could be applied with violence once, why not again?
- A final attempt tries to confront the radicals by saying that in Western contexts where they are in a minority, Muslims should be following Muhammad's example at Mecca, where he was weak and in minority. There he preached tolerance and peace. This is quite a promising way forward but there is a problem: Muhammad moved from Mecca to Medina, from weakness to strength, peace to violence. Presumably on this reading of things, as soon as their numbers are great enough in the West, Muslims ought to follow the radicals

In short, the moderates have to take some brave, dangerous and difficult steps to confront this problem. It is to a large extent an **intra-Islamic problem**.

To conclude, then:

1. There is a debate within Islam at the moment over this issue
2. Not all Muslims are radicals, not all are moderates. Islam is diverse.
3. But the traditional ways of reading the texts better support the radicals.

How then, should Christians respond in the light of this? That is a question that Jay will attempt to answer.

---

<sup>14</sup> See Reuven Firestone, *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Bari, M. Abdul, 'Muslim Identity in Britain Today' in *The Quest for Sanity*, Wembley: Muslim Council of Britain, 2002, 174-78.
- Firestone, Reuven, *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Gabriel, Mark A., *Islam and Terrorism*. Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2002.
- Geisler, Norman L. and Saleeb, Norman, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in the Light of the Cross*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993.
- Gunaratna, Rohan, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*. New York: Berkley Books, 2002.
- Riddell, Peter G., *Christians and Muslims: Pressures and Potential in a Post-911 World*. Leicester: IVP, 2004.
- Riddell, Peter G. and Cotterell, Peter, *Islam in Context: Past, Present and Future*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003.
- Tamimi, Azzam, 'Human Rights: Islamic and Secular Perspectives' in *The Quest for Sanity*, Wembley: Muslim Council of Britain, 2002, 229-35.