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Eyes wide shut to Islamist threat

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN JANUARY 12, 2015 12:00AM



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke Source: TheAustralian

AS the Australian summer dims memories of the Lindt cafe, the terrorist attacks in Paris are a savage reminder of the world we're in. Yesterday, European leaders gathered to honour the victims; but barbarism will hardly be defeated by pious pleas for unity.

The reality is that there is a problem with Islam. To say that is not to deny Islam's immense diversity, impugn the millions of Muslims who abhor the horrors being wreaked in their name, or dispute the enduring value of religious faith in a secular age.

But it is undeniable that Islam's distinctive features make it especially vulnerable to being used to incite religiously motivated violence.

Those features include the glorification of battle, with Mohammed mounting 65 exitions against unbelievers in his decade-long rule in Medina, and personally commanding nearly half of them; the duty to wage jihad and "terrify the enemies of God", fighting unbelievers until "the religion is God's entirely"; the aspiration to impose Sharia law and restore the caliphate, an Islamic concept without parallel in the other Abrahamic religions; and the cult of martyrdom, with Mohammed himself being quoted as longing to be killed in jihad only to be resurrected and then killed fighting again.

For sure, in other religions too there are myriad elements that are far from irenic. But as a foremost scholar of Islam, Princeton professor Michael Cook, notes, "such thinking is not just older in Islam, it also bulks larger". The result, Cook concludes, is a "heritage (that) lends

itself so easily to fundamentalisation that it could almost be said to invite it”.

That “fundamentalisation” has proceeded further in Islam than in any other major religion. As Cook argues, that trend is partly a reaction to the failure of Arab nationalism and its secularist ambitions. It is accentuated by the sectarian mayhem in the Middle East. And it may also reflect the process, identified by the sociologist Richard Madsen, in which better educated believers demand a creed that is more internally consistent, and hence purer and stricter, than religious practice in traditional societies.

But whatever the causes, the effects are tangible and confronting. For example, in a recent study of the Paris basin, the French Arabist Gilles Kepel shows that while the first generation of North African migrants operated on the old Islamic rule which tolerated non-Muslim marriage and dietary practices so long as they were those of “people of the book”, subsequent generations have become increasingly committed both to halal and to the Koranic prescriptions on relations between the sexes. As well as very low intermarriage rates, the result is a growing gap between the non-Muslim French population, 76 per cent of whom say religion plays “little or no role” in daily life and in their attitudes to other people, and the Muslim population, in which 78 per cent of respondents view religion as “important or very important”.

That would scarcely matter were renewed Islam merely a pietistic faith preaching withdrawal from the world, as so many cults do; but rather than merely rejecting modernity, the fundamentalists seek to destroy it. Little wonder increasing numbers of Muslims regard France as taghut, that is, as an enemy culture at the outer limits of idolatry.

And with a resurgence of Muslim hostility towards Jews, identified by fundamentalists such as Sayyid Qutb as Islam’s eternal foe, the ground is set for the murderers who stormed Charlie Hebdo and killed the hostages at a kosher supermarket.

No doubt, France’s problems with Islam are worsened by its broader woes. Planning rules which isolate migrants in bleak social housing blocks, often far from public transport; industrial relations laws and minimum wages which condemn school-leavers to long-term unemployment, breeding a cycle of petty crime, imprisonment and reoffending; and an educational system in which the children of manual workers are one-20th as likely as their better off counterparts to enter the grandes écoles that unlock the gates to one of the most hermetic governing castes in the world, have all fuelled resentments on which jihadism feeds.

But even accepting those factors’ role, it would be foolish to think the global trends affecting Islam do not operate here. Rather, the only real question is how to respond.

For some, the answer lies in a dose of Neville Chamberlain with a rhetorical dash of JS Mill. Understandably fearful of driving into extremism young Muslims who might feel stigmatised, they hope Islamic religious leaders can be induced to act as a calming influence. Unfortunately, there is little evidence to suggest that approach can succeed.

For example, since 1989, French governments have pursued a strategy of promoting allegedly “moderate” elements in the Islamic community as a counterweight to the extremists, while pouring subsidies into disadvantaged areas. The effects, however, have been perverse, as the strategy has given religious authorities even greater prominence than they would otherwise

have had, entrenching religion as the organising principle in the community's structure.

A seemingly more effective strategy would be a "zero tolerance" policing approach, using every instrument at the government's disposal to deter, disrupt and destroy terrorism. Vigorously enforcing our laws against inciting violence, including by actively running cases against the Arabic language radio stations, blogs and preachers peddling hatred, would be a good place to start. So would cancelling the passports of any Australians who choose to join jihadis overseas.

On all that, there can, should and will be argument. As a free society, we treat religion as a private matter, and are uncomfortable intervening in religious affairs. But the time for playing Peter Pan with reality — closing one's eyes and wishing really hard — is long over. Either we face the problem with Islam or, like Charlie, we die.

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