

THE AUSTRALIAN

Plain truth: Farhad Jabar was a murderer, not a victim

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

On this, let us be absolutely clear: Farhad Jabar, who shot police accountant Curtis Cheng, was not a victim but a murderer.

The attempt to transform him into an object of pity, abused by fanatical Islamists like innocent children have been by pedophile priests, is abhorrent, absolving the terrorist of the moral responsibility for his act. And by placing all religions on the same plane, it distracts attention from Islam's role in producing this killer and from the risk that it will produce many more.

To say that is not to deny that 15-year-olds such as Jabar can be troubled and resentful, as are many young adults. As they struggle with those emotions, some seek in religion the bearings to help navigate a way through life. And they may then be vulnerable to exploitation, as those in positions of authority take advantage of their power.

But appalling though they are, those crimes cannot erase basic differences between religions.

The "Spirit of Generation Y" study, which examined the spiritual journey of the cohorts born from 1981 to 1995, is telling in this respect.

Far from being set on a murderous course, it found that the 17 per cent of young Australians who became actively involved in Christian churches were more likely than the average member of their generation to display high levels of tolerance and social concern, as well as to engage in volunteering and community outreach. Rather than hate, they learned to thrive.

And those churches' positive impacts may be even more marked on recent arrivals, with detailed ethnographic studies highlighting the role new Christian movements, such as Hillsong in Sydney and Melbourne's Crossway Baptist Church, play both in strengthening bonds between young Asians and in helping them build firm bridges to Australian society.

The contrast to Jabar's Islamic prayer group could not be starker. No doubt, its death cult was particularly extreme. But it would be wrong to view the problem as reducible to a few firebrands, pullulating at Islam's lunatic fringe. There are, for sure, some of those; and yes, they ruthlessly manipulate and exploit their followers. But if their proselytising efforts are so successful, it is because they fall on well-prepared ground.

Nowhere are the contours of that ground more clearly explored than in a recent large-scale survey by Ruud Koopmans, a leading Dutch sociologist. On average, Koopmans found, Muslims in six European countries were at least five times more likely than self-identified Christians to be fundamentalists, including believing that it was more important to respect religious than secular laws. And education and incomes, Koopmans's statistical analysis shows, explain only a very small part of that gap.

Koopmans rightly notes significant differences between Muslims, with the Alawites least

likely to be fundamentalists, while Shiites were more likely than Sunnis. But despite those differences, Koopmans found widespread “out-group hostility”, with more than half the Muslims in the survey believing “the West is attempting to destroy Islam”, and close to half believing “Jews cannot be trusted”.

Given those attitudes, violence invariably lurks a small step away. That is why Malek Boutih, the French Socialist parliamentarian of Algerian descent who prepared the official report on last January’s terrorist attacks, decisively rejects the claim that a distinction should be drawn between purist or conservative versions of Islam on the one hand and jihadism on the other.

It is true, he says, that most imams condemn bloodshed; but all too often, the ideology they promote legitimates the very actions they claim to denounce. That ideology, Boutih finds, has three key components: the conviction that Islam, the one true faith, is under attack, while individual Muslims are disrespected and defiled; the claim that those attacks are the work of Jews and “Crusaders”; and the call for believers to act, righting intolerable wrongs.

All that creates an atmosphere of victimhood on which the Islamists can readily build. Their tactics, says Boutih, are simple: first comes the demand that the faithful, instead of integrating into a hostile and corrupt West, distance themselves from it through stringent prayer, dietary and dress requirements; and once those steps, which are entirely legal, have been taken comes the slide into extremism.

Boutih denies those drawn into this web are mere dupes. A quarter of the cases of radicalisation he examined involved minors; even so, they were exercising agency, but in a broader social and religious context that channels their decisions towards destruction.

With the Middle East sinking into anarchy, there is little reason to believe that context, which is now deeply entrenched in Islam, will change of its own volition; and, Boutih suggests, its persistence is facilitated by those who should be calling it to account.

For example, teachers and social workers, who experience its outcomes on a daily basis, “frequently identify with the populations at issue, and in any event believe religion is a private matter in which they are reluctant to interfere”.

As for the West’s intellectual and political elites, they are petrified of being accused of “Islamophobia” — a term, Boutih says, “the Islamists themselves invented and constantly use” — and so tiptoe around unpleasant realities. The result is that each terrorist outrage is followed by ritual calls for mutual understanding that just confirm the Islamists’ claim that Western societies are ultimately weak.

That is not to suggest greater honesty by our political leaders would cure the problems; of course it wouldn’t. Nor is it to belittle the work many well-intentioned Muslims are doing. But responsibility must be slated where it belongs, which is not only with the fanatics but with all those in the Muslim community who fan the resentments that make the fanatics’ task so much easier.

Until we are willing to plainly state that truth, murderers such as Farhad Jabar will triumph.