

8 A second Age of Extremes or a second Age of Enlightenment?

Summary

This book has put forward the argument that Islam, Islamism and Islamist Extremism are Worldviews that have all been generated out of the various tendencies of the Islamic tradition, but which have become fundamentally different bodies of belief and practice with different concomitant outlooks on the world. The book has explored the substance of these Worldviews and why they have come to pass.

Mainstream Islam, in all its multifarious denominational forms, is characterized philosophically as a Worldview of unity-in-diversity, the integration of belief and practice and the balance between the rights of God Almighty to worship and the rights of humankind to well-being and respect, including just governance. Mainstream Islam is a unifying Worldview which provides the ethical and legal conditions for peace as the basic premise of just and worshipful human life. Mainstream Islam sanctions self-defensive, openly declared and regulated warfare as a *temporary phase* so that the conditions of peace between peoples of all types may be recovered as quickly as possible.

Islamism is characterized as a Worldview of exaggerated difference between the Muslim and the non-Muslim, and the inversion of the traditional relationship between religion and politics in Islam, so that for Ideological Islamists the establishment of an Islamic State becomes an article of faith and a *sine qua non* of genuine Islamic belief.

Non-Violent Islamist Extremism is characterized by the absolute, eternal separation and non-identity of the Muslim and non-Muslim and the Disavowal (*Bara'*) and the sub-humanization of the Infidel (*kafir*) (including the 'wrong' and 'partial' Muslim).

The Worldview of Violent Islamist Extremism (VIE) is characterized by the absolute, eternal separation and non-identity of the Muslim and non-Muslim (including the 'wrong' and 'partial' Muslim) with lethal consequences for non-VIE out-groups. The proof of a VIE Muslim's loyalty (*Wala'*) to Islam becomes the commitment to annihilate violently all aspects of *Kufr* (Unbelief) and the system (*milla*) of the Infidel (*kafir*) as the precursor to establishment of a violent,

legally literalist Islamic State. Violent Islamist Extremism justifies savage, de-regulated *ad hoc* violence as an *eternal corollary* of the supposedly divided nature of the Cosmos.¹

The political conditions of Extremism

The previous considerations are matters of theology and ideology which have been the principal focus of the book. Although I have alluded to the oppressive political conditions in which Ideological Islamism and Islamist Extremism are particularly prone to thrive, so far the focus of the book has not been the contemporary political conditions in which Islamist Extremism and, indeed, the other extremisms such as Far Right Extremism, which is its mirror image and foil, can flourish. In this summary chapter, I will embed the book's argument briefly in this Bigger Social and Political Picture.

The first Age of Extremes

In his book the *Age of Extremes* (1994), the historian Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012 CE) explained that the 'short' twentieth century (1914–1991 CE) from the First World War to the fall of the USSR was the age both of nation-states and the ideological extremes of Communism, Fascism and Nationalism. These, in turn, were the statist legacy of the demise of the Empires which had thrived in the 'long' nineteenth century (1789–1914 CE) which ran from the French Revolution to the commencement of the First World War.

Islamism in all the various forms described in this book is, I suggest, the product of the same dynamic. It is the ideological outcome of the political demise of Imperial Ottoman Islam and the reconfiguration of the Muslim-majority world into nation-states, wedded to the master counter-narrative of the re-establishment of a pristine, pure Islamic State.

Hobsbawm's other insight about the changing nature of human political and social behavior over the course of the twentieth century also holds true both for Mainstream Islam and, dangerously, for the various forms of Islamist Extremism that we have examined. The power of real, live human collectives of all types and their cultures to shape, to give texture and to moderate human behavior has radically waned in the last part of the 'long' twentieth century (1991–present); at the same time as the power of the individual to shape, modify and powerfully project his/her own ideas about the nature of the world and

1 As a by-product, the book has argued that in the sincerity of their affirmation of the Unity of God and the finality of the Prophethood of Muhammad all the people that, in their own individual ways, have substantiated these Worldviews are undeniably Muslim. However, in the ways that this affirmation plays out in their religious beliefs, attitudes to others and behaviors in the world, they are profoundly and fundamentally different.

indeed the Next World and the theological World, un-moderated and un-mediated, has radically increased.²

The explosion in the use and power of social media of proliferating types is both an expression of this force of individualism and the means of its reproduction and amplification throughout the world. It is also an expression of the increase in tension in the individualized environment of knowledge and information between non-professional individuals and professional, collectivized actors such as a journalists and civil servants. From one point of view, fake news is just facts about events that are not true and therefore that are not facts at all; from another one point of view, fake news is the news about non-events that are believed to exist by thousands of individuals, regardless of the will of professional journalistic collectives. Therefore, fake news wields power as a demi-reality – something without truth or real existence, but which causes real effects in the world.

The individualization of Islamism

As far as religious Worldviews are concerned, therefore, the secularization thesis has undoubtedly been proved wrong by the ‘long’ twenty-first century: the religion of Islam and others, notably evangelical Christianity, are as important worldwide as ever before; the individualization thesis, however, holds true. In common with those of other faiths and political affiliations, Mainstream Muslims, Islamist Muslims and Islamist Extremists are likely to hold and mediate their Worldviews on a more individual basis with less contact with mosques, associations and large groups than ever before.

This is why it is so important to understand the differences as Worldviews between Islam, Islamism and Islamist Extremism, since individuals espousing extreme Islamist Worldviews are less and less likely, especially since the relative demise of Al-Qaeda, the killing of Osama bin Laden and the territorial collapse of ISG, to be part of a real, physical ideological mass movement, and more and more likely to be individuals whose extremism is projected into and by social media, with digital Islamisms, as the currency of their communication.

Why? The root causes of Islamist Extremism

In the twenty-first century, we have shifted from mass ideological movements to masses of individualized Worldviews that are the potent catalysts to a range of the root causes of extremism. These root causes, that only require the match of ideology to be ignited into full-blown extremism, include noxious determinate absences³ and malign presences in some peoples’ lives. Noxious absences at the root of Islamist Extremism include:

- 2 The power of President Donald Trump’s Tweeting, both before and after his election, show us the power of the individualized Worldview.
- 3 Bhaskar, *Dialectic*.

1 A relative lack of employment, status and wealth that is commensurate with a person's talent or qualifications;

As Wilkinson and Pickett⁴ have shown, it is *relative* lack of employment, wealth and status, when people do not feel that they are achieving their just deserts relative to different types of other people that can be most alienating. It should be noted, for example, that the key 9/11 suicide bombers came from relatively affluent, educated backgrounds from societies in which it is notoriously difficult for the straightforwardly talented to make progress. Globalized media has amplified dreams of success for millions of educated people in the developing Muslim-majority world who are often then denied access to it.

2 Lack of civic belonging and empowerment;

An absence of civic belonging in a *minority* of young Muslims in Western and Muslim nation-states makes them vulnerable to the extremist narrative of Disavowal (*bara'*) of all ties of national and local citizenship in favor of a monolithic Islamist sense of exclusive belonging to the Global Community (*Umma*) of Islam.⁵

3 An absence of effective Islamic education and educational attainment;

An absence of a basic Islamic education and poor outcomes of mainstream schooling are regular features of all types of Islamist Extremism, especially among VIE footsoldiers. Moreover, madrasa-style Islamic education has often left children reflectively unprepared to deal with the complex issues of being a Muslim in a secularizing society. This absence of basic Islamic education and educational attainment leaves some people vulnerable to ideological recruitment and to the simplistic 'Us vs. Them' Worldview of Islamist Extremism. This lack of Islamic religious literacy also accounts in part for the over-representation of converts to Islam among extremists.

4 An absence of engaged parenting.

Moreover, it is also a regular feature of VIE terrorism that parents of those convicted of terrorist charges have lost touch with the activities and development of their children, often mediated by the internet and social media, as they enter young adulthood.

These root causes of extremism also include 'vicious presences' such as:

1 Political oppression and corruption;

This is related to the relative un- and under-employment cited above, since political oppression and corruption prevent the talent of the young from gaining its just recognition and deserts;

⁴ Wilkinson and Pickett, *The Spirit Level*.

⁵ It should be remembered in this regard that repeated surveys show that Muslims in general in the UK evince significantly high levels of civic loyalty and connection to Britain. Such findings are entirely commensurate with the Mainstream Islamic Worldview of unity-in-diversity.

2 Anti-Muslim prejudice and invisible ‘glass-ceilings’;

The testimony of job interviewees wearing the *hijab* or with an obviously Muslim name, as well as anti-Muslim Hate Crimes statistics,⁶ suggest strongly that anti-Muslim prejudice is a determinate factor that prevents many young Muslims in Europe gaining fair access to the employment market and more generally prevents Muslims, as part of a ‘suspect community’, from gaining a fair social hearing in a whole range of different quarters.^{7,8}

3 The easy availability of arms and people prepared to fund violence in the Middle East;

The responsibility of Qatari, Iranian and Saudi business people in keeping the Syrian Civil War active is an immense source of shame to the Muslim-majority world.⁹ Mainstream Muslim-majority governments have often been prepared not to clamp down on VIE activity since they fear the damage to their credibility in Islamist quarters.

4 The presence and actions of Western armies and governments in Muslim-majority states.

The radicalizing effects of recent ill-judged Western policy and military interventions, even if they have been basically well-intentioned, including post-intervention policy that appears to have a sectarian either pro-Shia or pro-Sunni bias and drone-strikes aimed at militants that kill civilians, have been well documented.¹⁰

In the Middle East, it is common knowledge that a uniquely potent combination of a population explosion since the 1950s, an improvement in basic levels of technical education, relatively diminishing numbers of jobs and oppressive, corrupt, often Western-backed political regimes have created a uniquely ‘suitable’ environment for the ideologues of Islamist Extremism to thrive and find large numbers of willing recruits.

Within this cluster of ‘root causes’, Worldviews are not necessarily one of the root causes of Extremism – when adult human beings are prosperous, recognized by society and personally fulfilled, they overwhelmingly do not turn to violence against their fellow civilians to achieve political ends.

Nevertheless, the root causes cited previously¹¹ feed into, generate and then endlessly confirm the absolutely divided ‘Us vs. Them’, ‘pure Muslim victimized by corrupt Infidel (*Kafir*)’ Worldviews of Non-Violent and Violent Islamist Extremism. As such, these Worldviews certainly are undoubtedly potent catalysts to Islamist separatism and violence and the currency and the medium by which terrorism

6 TellMAMA, ‘Anti-Muslim Hatred, Terrorism, Media Sources, Far Right Networks & Spike Points’.

7 Alexandra, ‘Muslim Women at “Disadvantage” in Workplace’.

8 ‘Discrimination Against Muslim Women – Fact Sheet’.

9 Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*.

10 Burke, *Al-Qaeda*; Burke, *The 9/11 Wars*.

11 And doubtless others.

is communicated, justified and replicated by people suffering from a whole range of malign generative mechanisms of disaffection.

The second Age of Extremes

However, it is not only alienated, marginalized individuals propagating extreme ideological Worldviews through social media who are driving Non-Violent and Violent Islamist Extremism. We are now living in a period when powerful, global interest groups, both state actors and quasi-state actors, are premised on perpetuation of polarized extremes or the polarization of near-extremes.

Obviously, for example, the Israel-Palestine (1947-present) conflict is premised for many of its actors on the denial of the basic rights to self-determination and humanity of both parties and a mutual demonization and commitment to destruction of the 'out-group'. For some in HAMAS, 'the Jews' are the 'out-group' from God's Mercy who have been in eternal rebellion against God and His commands and are destined to be driven out of Israel and slaughtered as a presage to the End of Times.

For some Israeli Jews, Palestinian Muslims are an obstacle to their God-given inheritance of the Land of Greater Israel and therefore can only ever be, at best, second-class citizens and, at worst, need to be eradicated. These two polarized narratives are, for some, comfortable because, despite the endless cycle of bloodshed and attendant misery that they justify, they are clear explanatory Worldviews that provide a coherent world-ordering idea which is easy to sell to willing recruits and pass on to the next benighted generation.

Extremists need each other

In a fast-polarizing atmosphere of Western liberal politics, Islamist Extremists, as we have seen, find it relatively easy and convincing to explain the plight of the Muslim world in terms of the eternal enmity of the Crusading-Zionist forces of global Unbelief (*Kufr*) ranged against the pure, embattled, Godly community of pristine Islam.

This is mirrored by Far-right Extremists who blame the apparent decline of Western global hegemony and their own individual inability to come to terms emotionally and economically with changes brought about by globalization on a global Islamist conspiracy to Islamize Europe and the whole world.

It is obvious that in this polarized dynamic that both extreme sides 'need' each other as evidence that their extreme Worldview is true and that their *raison d'être* holds good. In this respect, it is common to find videos of Far-right, Islamophobic rallies embedded in Violent Islamist Extremist propaganda – for example in videos of the so-called Blasphemy Movement in Pakistan which encourage the extra-judicial lynching of those who are deemed to have insulted either Islam or the Prophet Muhammad-as 'evidence' of the eternal and essential enmity of Islam and the West.

The cultural hinterlands of Extremism

What is less obvious than the overt mutual ‘othering’ of extremists are the covert, cultural hinterlands that incubate these extremisms that many citizens of different types allow or even quietly encourage.

Far Right Extremism can only actively persist because many citizens of European countries believe or at least are not prepared to challenge the idea that Muslims, who may not accept *prima facie* all the premises of secular liberalism, do not fit into life in Europe. Such people do not realize how deeply alienating to Muslim young people their insulting attitudes are and how much they feed into extremist narratives.

Islamist Extremism can only persist because significant pockets of the Muslim community are prepared to stereotype non-Muslims as inherently Godless and lacking in morality and exist and operate as if the world were divided into the ‘Us’ world of the Muslim and the ‘Them’ world of the Infidel (*kuffar*).

In this new cultural Cold War of low-level mutual Muslim/non-Muslim ‘othering’, elements of the media in its obsession to ‘find stories’ based on polarized dialectics are also not without blame – generating the feeling for many people of faith that faith itself is now a marginal social activity and the views of the orthodox faithful on important matters such as abortion or homosexual marriage are barely tolerated and fast becoming ‘taboo’.

“Those who go to extremes are bound to be destroyed”

In bemoaning the increasing proliferation of extremes or near-extremes, one should not be utopian. Individuals and groups always have and always will define themselves to some degree against and by not-being something/someone else: a basic characteristic of the ‘I’ is that I am not ‘You’; a basic characteristic of any ‘Us’ is that we are not ‘Them’. However, the mainstream political environment that has developed in the past ten years and accelerated with the Brexit vote (23 June 2016 CE) and the election of President Donald Trump (November 8 2016 CE) with vociferous support from the alt-right has recently introduced a regressive ugliness that had previously been restrained by, for example, a relatively tolerant pan-European Christian culture and multiculturalism.

This is not the place to discuss supposed realities and effects of the decline, if not fall, of institutional European Christianity. As for multiculturalism, the Civil Rights movement in the United States of America in the 1960s and the race riots in Britain of the 1970s inspired the grass-roots movement in education and politics of multiculturalism that ushered in three decades of relative civil/civic restraint in Europe and America when talking about and dealing with the ‘Other’, especially the ethnic and religiously minor, non-white Christian ‘Other’.

However, this movement for a more universal equality, flourishing and respect has all but collapsed under the stultifying effects of its own political correctness, and the fact that the fruits of the globalized economy that the multicultural ethos heralded and facilitated have not been in any way evenly spread through society. Globalization has been accompanied by an increasing of the income and cultural gap within liberal democracies such as the UK and the US and between the globalized rich and the localized, relatively and sometimes absolutely poor.¹²

Increasingly, as a result of the almost constant discrediting of the multicultural center,¹³ we are witnessing the emergence of two civil society ethical-rhetorical extremes. At one ‘free-speech’ extreme, it is now no longer taboo to surrender to the rhetoric of the extreme demonizing and insulting of out-groups, even in the most crass and populist terms. As we saw in Donald Trump’s presidential campaign in his blanket threat to outlaw Muslims from entering America and his promise to build the US-Mexico Border Wall, it has even become a marker of political authenticity for politicians to ‘other’ non-white Europeans in general, and Muslims in particular, as a threat to the security of civilization. As we have seen, in a similar way it has long been a marker of Islamists since Sayyid Qutb to ‘other’ liberal democrats and especially American liberal democrats as prurient, Godless and an essential threat to Islam.

At the other rhetorical extreme, ‘no-platforming’ of anyone and any idea that a group or person does not like to hear in the public space by students, universities and governments, as happened recently to the feminist thinker Germaine Greer for expressing her views on transgenering, has created a dangerous tyranny of political correctness in which the direction of legal and normative travel of secular liberal society cannot in any way be openly challenged. This drives legitimate, critical alternative views underground and even to violent extremes.

In this cultural and political environment in which the extremes and the near-extremes have gobbled up so much of the center-ground, I would argue that the new Struggle for Muslims and those of other faiths alike is resisting and combatting extremisms of all types, including climate-change denial.¹⁴ Our Struggle is to ensure the survival of civilized human and, relatedly, diverse and rich natural life and not to let the critical, rational voice of faith be silenced. Part of this Struggle will involve creating and protecting a public space in which rational debate, conducted in full sentences and not sound-bites, is possible and in which all types of rational voices, including rational religious voices, that do not advocate violence or the type of hatred that leads to violence, are included and respected.

12 Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere*.

13 Triggered, or perhaps reflected, by the former Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, Trevor Phillip’s, comment that Britain was “sleepwalking into segregation”. Casciani, ‘Analysis’.

14 In the face of overwhelming empirical scientific evidence for it.

In this urgent imperative for society to pull back from the extremes and re-engage with the ideal of universal human and natural flourishing, everyone would, I believe, do well to heed the words of a seventh-century religious reformer called Muhammad, son of Abdullah, if you are not Muslim; Muhammad, the Prophet of God, if you are.

It is reported by Muslim on the authority of Ibn Mas'ud that the Prophet Muhammad said, *"Those who go to extremes are bound to be destroyed."* And he repeated it three times.