How should we respond to Islamic extremism in the Arab World?

Islam is not monolithic. There are about 1.9 billion Muslims in the world – nearly 24% of the global population. It is easy to generalise a particular issue. But it is important for us not to give a false or exaggerated testimony of our neighbour (Ex. 20:16 – one of the Ten Commandments). So we must allow Muslims to define themselves.

In Northern Ireland a couple of decades ago we needed to carefully distinguish between Protestants and Catholics and between the Roman Catholic Church and the IRA. We need this same discernment today. Recently a Muslim leader in Bradford gave his estimates of the Muslim men he knew as follows:

70% are traditional Muslims carrying out the traditions they brought from Pakistan decades ago.

15% are Islamists who are growing slowly among the mainly under 25-year-old men.

15% are really nominal Muslims and they are also growing.

But most neat categories don't fit well with reality.

The Basic Convictions held by most Muslims Worldwide

The Umma (i.e. Muslim people) believe:

- There is a worldwide attack on Islam. Theirs is an honour-shame culture and currently there is a great feeling of being shamed. They remember well the great Golden Age of Islam. It is taught in all schools in history and religion classes.

  They know of the 1st Islamic state created in Medina by Muhammad in A.D. 622. By A.D. 630 Muhammad had captured Mecca. By A.D. 730 – within a hundred years – the borders of the Islamic state (the Caliphate) included southern France, Spain, Sicily and southern Italy, North Africa from Morocco to Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Persia, much of Central Asia (Kashgar in China was captured) and the Indus Valley in India.

  The Muslim World – based in Baghdad – had wealth and power. It developed science and technology and all this while Europe was in the dark ages!

  So what has gone wrong? Why is the state of Islam in the world so weak and divided? The answer given by Muslims is that the practice of real Islam has been in steady decline for the last 300 years and this decline must be reversed!

- Their basic premise is that God has given mankind His law (the *Sharia*) to show us humans how to live. The implication of this is that every Muslim must live in a Muslim state, for in Islam there is no separation between religion and the state. So Muslims either live in the *Dar al-Islam* (the house of peace) or they live in the *Dar al-Harb* (the house of war) in which they must "fight" to convert it into the *Dar al-Islam*. So Islam must rule and they must hold on to what they rule. This is very difficult for 25% of all Muslims who live outside the *Dar al-Islam.*

- *Jihad* means 'struggle' and for 14 centuries it has meant armed struggle to advance Muslim power. Muslims in the West like to re-interpret the word to mean a struggle to retain their Muslim values.

A very brief look at history:

- Muhammad had a hard time in Mecca from the pagans. He was "commanded" to flee to Medina where some of the early Muslims had gone: *"You are enjoined (commanded) to fight, though it is something you dislike …"* (Quran 2:216-217)

- Most Muslims can't forget that from about 700 A.D. to 1950 most of the land ruled by Muslims had come under direct Western Christian rule: the British, the French, the Dutch and the Russians and those not colonised (like Iran/Afghanistan) were interfered with.

- They used to rule over Christians and now Christians ruled over them. They once had vast lands in Europe not only in France, Spain and Italy, but in Eastern Europe: the Balkans, Hungary,

Ukraine, Moldova etc. – all part of the Ottoman Empire once ruled by Muslims and in the USSR the Caucasus area and much of Central Asia.

- The creation of the State of Israel in 1948 is an abiding 'thorn in the flesh'. Arab defeats in 1956, 1967 and so on only rub salt into the wound!
- It is hard to separate "religion" from "culture". The concept of honour in Islam (*izza*) means that every individual has an obligation to defend his family and his community. This sometimes leads to honour killings. There is a related concept "*ghaira*" (meaning zeal, fervour, having a sense of self-respect). So every Muslim should demonstrate pride in their prophet, in their religion and in their history and they should do something to restore its honour.
- Muhammad had a respect for the People of the Book – the Jews and the Christians – while he was in Mecca. But when Muhammad got to Medina he found there were 3 Jewish tribes living there and they refused to say that he was a prophet. So there are several verses in the Quran condemning the Jews. For example: 5:82 *"You will find the most hostile to the believer to be the Jews and the polytheists …."* And in the Hadith there are many anti-Semitic statements.
- In the Quran there is a spectrum of views on Christians. Some positive such as 5:82-83, *"… and you will find closest in affection to be believers those who say, 'We are Christians' "*. But there are other verses that are hostile. [See: 3:64; 3: 84; 4: 171; 29: 46; 5: 51; 5: 72- 73]
  Perhaps the most hostile is, *"Fight against those who do not believe in God, nor the last day and who do not hold forbidden what God has prohibited and who do not adhere to the religion of truth …. Reduce them to submission."*
- During the life of Muhammad nearly all the Arab tribes in Arabia submitted to him. After he died, his successor, Abu Bakr, had to fight to suppress the rebellion of many of the Arab tribes. The next Caliph, Umar, lead armies into Syria, Iraq and Egypt. He was killed in Medina. The next Caliph, Othman, was assassinated as was the 4th Caliph – Ali.

Current convictions that are turning ordinary Muslims into radical Islamists or turning non-violent Muslims to violence.

There are several important names:

- ✓ **Abd al-Wahab** (1703-1791) the founder of Wahabism. He was a radical reformer. His reformation is the basis of the current Saudi state.
- ✓ **Hasan al-Banna** (1906-1949) the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt
- ✓ **Abul A'la Mawdudi** in Pakistan (1903-1979)
- ✓ **Sayyid Qutb** in Egypt (1906-1966). His teaching led to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Each of these men saw the Muslim World of their day as bad as that in pre-Islamic Arabia. Their conclusion was that Muslims have abandoned real authentic Islam. These radical Muslims are often more angry with their fellow Muslims than they are with us.

In the early years of Islam Muslims used violence against their own rulers who were not faithful to Islam and especially against autocratic Muslim governments that colluded with the West.

The radical Islamists see Islam as a complete way of life that is, or should be, self-sufficient relying on resources within its own tradition to renew itself. While Muslims can benefit from advances in science, technology and medicine, they do not either want or need any secular and hedonistic ideologies developed in the West. They do not need to incorporate any elements of "Western Law" (even UN resolutions) into traditional Sharia Law. The implication of this is that radical Muslims must gain power in order to implement change.

Why are radical Islamists turning to violence?

There are 4 basic conditions:

- Being active in legitimate social and political activities such as protests is never going to be enough to achieve their radical aims within the normal political and legal framework.
- The only way to change the way the world operates is revolutionary jihad that is both defensive and offensive. So they reject conferences, negotiations, dialogues in favour of jihad. Jihad is every Muslim's obligation until all lands that were once Muslim are returned to radical Islam.
- Suicide in the context of jihad is justified. For Muslims, suicide is a sin, but the legal definition of suicide under Sharia depends on one's intention. If it is self-destruction due to despair, then it is sin. If it is to please God by fighting the enemies of Islam and this necessitates self-sacrifice, it is not suicide but martyrdom.
- The West in general and the USA in particular are seen as the great enemy. Often it is considered a jihad against Jews and Christians (called Crusaders). So it is the duty of all Muslims to kill Americans and all their allies. This interpretation is completely rejected by "moderate" Muslims who are the majority. They see radical Islam as a perversion and betrayal of the real Islam. This struggle is dividing the Muslim World and it is a huge internal struggle for "the soul of Islam".

How should we respond to Islam as a whole and especially to Radical Islam?

1. Address the theological issues involved

If you have a high view of Scripture, then you will quickly notice that most Muslims have a very similar view about the authority of the Quran. So both moderate and radical Muslims base their arguments on the authority of the Book.

So we can ask our Muslim friends, "What does the Quran really say on the subject of violence?" If they point out that jihad is only acceptable against infidels, we can point out that we have a similar problem! If we had only the Old Testament, then we might have come to the same conclusion by reading the Book of Joshua. But that has been abrogated in a literal, physical sense because the Lord Jesus taught us the opposite: ***"Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you."*** (Luke 6:27)

But we have no right to interpret the Quran to Muslims. Muslims themselves have interpreted the 'violent verses' very differently.

At the heart of this is one's attitude to power:

- As followers of the Lord Jesus, we change the world by giving up all forms of worldly power.
- For Muslims, it is clear to them that they must gain power.

Democracy is not at all helpful for it is only the tyranny of the majority and the radical Muslims are still a small minority.

2. Recognise the importance of political issues in the world

How can we help change how Muslims see the political state in the UK and all other "Christian"/Western countries? In the UK, the state's relations have been soured by a number of events:

- the Salman Rushdie affair (1988)
- the Gulf War (1990-91)
- the breakup of Yugoslavia and the slaughter of Muslims (beginning 1991)
- the 9/11 attack in 2001
- the London 7/7 attack in 2005
- British soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq
- our Navy sinking Somali boats
- our flights over Libya
- bombing in Iraq

All this has had a huge psychological impact on the British Muslim Community and has led to the emergence of British radical Islamists.

How do we encourage those who seek some sort of democracy in the Muslim World?

We need to start with our attitude to power and to perceived threats. We need to encourage a Bill of Rights where all people living in a state are equal under the law. This is true in most Western countries but is not at all true in most Muslim countries.

Egypt while the Muslim Brotherhood was in power all radical Muslims were released from prison. Many were more radical than the Brotherhood. One result was that many churches were destroyed and many moderate Muslims were killed. Now under President al-Sisi a new constitution has been passed. It is better than before, but still there is no equality for all. Christians don't have equal rights with Muslims. There is no right to change your religion. But fundamentally, Western politicians, just like the communists, believe that all problems are due to social and economic conditions. This is confusing ideology with reality. In an Islamic state there is no room for Christians or Jews or anyone else. But in Egypt there are at least 11 million Christians – over 13% of the population. Do they have the same rights as Muslims? The answer is No! Never! In an Islamic State there is no room for Christians and Jews (the People of the Book) and there is no room for "heretical" non-Sunni Muslims.

Syria: Both the Assad family and the Shah of Iran made **a trade** with their respective people: you can have some religious freedom as a trade-off with some political restrictions. Syria was a secular state until the recent troubles. A small Shia Alawi minority came to power on the basis of a socialist secular state. The same happened in Iran under the Shah – much religious liberty for minority groups in a nearly secular state until Ayatollah Khomeini came to power and Twelver Shi'ism became the religion of the state.

The current Syrian Civil War destroyed that consensus. For Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the Alawi domination was no longer acceptable. For these Arab Gulf States only Sunni Islam is acceptable. The fear of the Shia Islam of Iran who could possibly have made (or could make) a nuclear bomb is unacceptable. And yet there was a Shia corridor from Iran through southern Iraq and Alawi Syria down to the Hezbollah controlled Shia in Lebanon.

Sometimes it appears that politicians make decisions by comparing the size of different monsters! The Shia were a smaller monster than Israel and the Palestinian issue.

Syria and Iraq are tied together. The failure in Iraq to create a fair civil order for all Iraqis after the fall of Saddam Hussein has led to great disorder. Iraq is wealthy but nothing works. Iraqi Christians and other small minority groups (Yazidis, Mandeans etc.) have been attacked since the beginning of the Iraq War. Christians have been in Iraq since the 1st century A.D. The great missionary movement of the Church of the East in the early centuries was based there. Now the Christians in Iraq face genocide. Their numbers have been more than halved in the last 10 years. Many Christians have fled never to return. The number of Christians is down to 20% of what it was before the Gulf War.

Iran: Iran is a big player in all this. It is the largest and most powerful Shia state and it may possibly have nuclear weapons. The current president of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, was elected by the Iranians to bring about greater personal freedoms. But all his speeches and written material is censored by the ayatollahs. The state is really run by Ayatollah Al-Uzma. Under Rouhani, human rights have got worse especially for Iranian believers in the Lord Jesus! Many leaders have been killed and imprisoned. All worship services or house fellowships cannot be in Farsi (the language of Iran). They are allowed in Armenian, English etc. Many Iranian believers have been expelled and gone as refugees to Turkey.

The West talks about "dialogue" with Iran over the issue of nuclear weapons. But what Iranians really need is freedom for their people. The internal situation must change.

The Really Big Issue in the Arab World is the Israeli/Palestinian Issue

Often Christian/Western writers have argued that the rise of radical Islam is due to Islamic theology and its own history, so they minimise some of the great current political issues as the major reason driving so many young Muslims into radical Islam. Western imperialism may have been a cause in the 19th and early 20th centuries and may have been a motivating factor in the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and radicalism amongst Indian Muslims that gave rise to the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan, but since the 1950s the greatest single issue generating anger among Muslims everywhere – especially Arab Muslims – is the creation of the State of Israel. But the one-sided Western (Christian) support for Israel is the main grievance of all Islamists and most Arab Muslims.

This is a huge issue and it needs to be resolved. The only possible solution is to go back to the UN resolution made in 1948 and the 2 state solution – one for Israelis and one mainly for Muslim Arabs within Palestine. The PLO was a secular organisation under Arafat but since the late seventies it has been radicalised as we have seen in Gaza.

Israeli politicians, for the most part, don't want reconciliation for it allows a creeping annexation through encouraging Israeli settlements on the West Bank. It will take quite a while to build up trust between the two sides. A number of good books have been written on this issue by Colin Chapman, Stephen Sizer and Peter Walker.

Believers in the Lord Jesus – both Arabs and those of Jewish background – should reach out to all Muslims out of respect and love and never out of fear. We should love them, ***"You shall love your neighbour as yourself"***! (Mt. 19:19 and 22:39) We should work as hard as we can to build up a relationship of trust – see 1 Peter 3:16. Most Muslims are not Islamists and they are willing to listen to "honourable solutions".

So what are some solutions to the radicalisation of Muslims?

As Christians – followers of the Lord Jesus – what should we be doing?

1. **Pray** with intelligence and persistence for God's will to be done in these countries. God is building His Kingdom in the midst of the problems. Pray for leaders in these situations.

2. **Give generously** for the relief of refugees – food, clothing and shelter are the most basic needs. After that there is a need for schooling for the children and many health needs including dealing with post-traumatic stress. There is also a great need for income generating schemes.

There are 2 stages in relief:

- Meeting their immediate needs in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. But some of the refugees may never be able to go home. Remember the goal of ISIS is to de-Christianise the Islamic Caliphate and not only that, but to leave only Sunnis in the Caliphate. Christian refugees may never be able to "go home"
- Long-term solutions? Could there be a Christian homeland in the Near East in some way guarded by an international force? What can be done with all the minorities – the Kurds, the Shia and other minorities? Should we, in the UK, open up our doors to Christians from the Middle East to come in as immigrants?

3. **We who are believers in the Lord Jesus should be more active in advocacy** and pleading for fundamental freedoms and rights for all peoples irrespective of who they are. We need to become much bolder about bearing witness that we are followers of the Lord Jesus and are committed to overcoming evil with good. (Rom. 12:21) As followers of the Lord Jesus we must respond to injustice and we must seek to change the world.

4. **We need to prepare ourselves for some "hard talk" with radical Muslims**:

- We should join hands with those who condemn terrorism in the name of religion whether in the name of Christianity in any form or Islamists or the RSS in India or radical Buddhism in Myanmar or Sri Lanka.

- We need to be prepared to be critical about our own history and all the mistakes we made in the centuries of imperialism.
- We need to ask ourselves what is our ideal political order? Have we ever achieved that? John Calvin tried to produce this in Geneva and it failed miserably. We need to be realistic about the real intentions of some Muslims, as well as all others who have a hidden agenda such as the secularists. We must realise that inevitably there will be diversity. We must be determined that we will relate to all people with openness and honesty, taking a strong stand on human rights and working for the common good of the whole of society.
- We need to recognise that as evangelical believers we **can** play a role as peacemakers. One of the problems of Western democracies is that the link between religion and the state has become meaningless. Secular politicians speak much about safeguarding the rights of every community, but they don't have the worldview to relate in a meaningful way with Muslims who want to bring God into the public sphere and for whom God's will is paramount. We, of all people, should understand both sides. We ought to be peacemakers and bridge builders.
- We need to prepare ourselves to ask questions that will open up discussions with the radical Islamists here are some starting points:
    - ✓ You say, 'Islam is the answer'. Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan all describe themselves as Islamic. As you look at any of these countries are they demonstrating that they have the answer?
    - ✓ Do you accept the concept of universal human rights – for example in the area of the status of women, freedom of religion and freedom to change one's religion?
    - ✓ Does the end justify the means? What about using democratic processes to subvert democracy?
    - ✓ Are you willing to accept the existence of a pluralistic society? We weep over the many failings of Western societies and culture. We have many bad examples in European history when religion (Christianity) was too closely related to the state. Doesn't it say in the Quran, *"There is no compulsion in religion"* (2:256)?
    - ✓ How do you interpret the Sunna? There was a constitution that Muhammad brokered between the Jews of Medina and the newly arrived Muslims from Mecca and under this constitution both Muslims and Jews had equal rights.

Finally, we must become much bolder in bearing witness to the Lord Jesus. We must increasingly become committed to the principle of overcoming evil with good (Rom 12:21). As followers of the Lord Jesus we ought to have a very distinctive way of responding to injustice and seeking to change the world.