Out of Hours

Can religious fundamentalism reform for the benefit of public health?

Currently the issue of Islamist extremism is extremely topical and I was struck recently by the relevance to clinical practice. In the month during which this article was written I received clinical guidance regarding statutory reporting for the practice of female genital mutilation; and a reminder from my employers to complete Prevent Training — a core pillar of the government's de-radicalisation response to the threat of terrorism. It felt timely, therefore, to read two books I had recently purchased. The first is written by Robert Dreyfuss, who has written extensively on US foreign affairs as the Middle East Intelligence director of the *Executive Intelligence Review*, the flagship journal of the Lyndon LaRouche movement.¹

The second book is written by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a woman of Somalian heritage who fled from an arranged marriage to the Netherlands, served as a member of the Dutch parliament, and then obtained asylum in the US following the murder by an Islamist terrorist of her colleague on a film regarding the oppression of women under Islam.²

ARE THERE SOCIOECONOMIC AND WIDER POLITICAL DETERMINANTS OF RELIGIOUS TERRORISM?

Dreyfuss's core assertion is that more than a century of Western involvement (initially through the British Empire and latterly by the US) has caused deep resentment among certain sectors of the Middle East that has significantly contributed to the international spread of Islamist terrorism. He presents the readership with recommendations for the US 'to turn down the heat', to 'lower the political temperature underneath the Islamist movement'.¹ Dreyfuss does not underestimate the scale of the task and his recommendations may seem unrealistic to many. For example, he recommends a UN settlement to end the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that guarantees justice for the Palestinians through an independent Palestinian state that is geographically and economically viable, tied to withdrawal of illegal Israeli settlements and an Israeli return to roughly its 1967 borders, and a stable and equitable division of Jerusalem. Such a bold recommendation is in addition to suggesting the US abandon its imperialist pretensions in the Middle East. He states that such changes would lead to a growing momentum in the Middle East for religious and political reform.

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THEOLOGICAL DETERMINANTS OF TERRORISM?

However, Ali makes a very different assertion. Recounting her childhood in Somalia where she underwent the practice of female genital mutilation, she asserts that Islam is not a religion of peace and cites passages in the Qur'an in which God commands Jihad (holy war). She contends that a reformation of Islam is the only way to end Islamist terrorism and associated repression of women. Crucially she refutes the Western liberal view regarding socioeconomic determinants of terrorism (for example, Western political involvement in the Middle East as exemplified by the Iraq War). Rather she asserts that the violent acts of Islamist terrorists cannot be divorced from the religious doctrine that is embedded within Islam itself. Her key recommendations include a challenge to orthodox Islam in its literal interpretation of the Qur'an and specifically a challenge regarding legitimacy within the sacred texts and teachings of Islam to wage Jihad. Ali questions why religious orthodoxy finds it so hard to progress and reinterpret passages from its sacred texts in the light of developments in human history and experience. Her recommendation to mainstream Islam is simple — declare 'Jihad' as 'Haram', that is, that which is 'forbidden' (as opposed to that which is 'Halal' — that is, 'permissible').

COMMON GROUND IN CONSIDERING DETERMINANTS OF RELIGIOUS TERRORISM

So what to make of these two opposing world views and is there considered thought behind the sensationalist book titles? To address this question I looked for commonality in their respective positions and reassuringly found it regarding historical facts: in particular, the key importance of a man named Hassan

al-Banna who in 1928 helped found the Muslim Brotherhood. Dreyfuss portrays al-Banna as the ideological 'grandfather' of Osama bin Laden. Both authors agree that the Muslim Brotherhood is a terrorist organisation of the Islamist Right. Interestingly, Ali joined the Muslim Brotherhood as a teenager in Somalia because she perceived the Brotherhood to be Islam in action, plucking troubled teenagers from the streets and supporting them through education. She asserts that people embraced the Brotherhood because they brought order; achieved through an ideology that this life is temporary and that if the individual lived outside the dictates of the Prophet one would burn in hell for the duration of one's 'real' life, that is, the 'afterlife'. However, by living righteously Allah would reward the individual with entry into paradise and men in particular would receive special blessings if they became warriors for Allah. As a result, the faith of her parents (which she summarises as that of individuals being put on earth to be tested, fearing judgement and asking God to be patient) had now transformed into one of being soldiers of God. Ali provides an example of such a change in herself that, when Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran called for Salman Rushdie (the author of *The Satanic Verses*) to die, she agreed with the fatwa.

As I read on I found both books complemented each other. Although not written as a historical text, there is much to admire regarding Dreyfuss's knowledge of Middle Eastern history. I learned a lot regarding the historical geopolitics of the region, in particular the need for the British Empire's safe travel routes to India. I also read how the West would court the Middle East as an ally during the Cold War in resistance to the totalising paradigm of Communism. Dreyfuss also states that two-thirds of the world's oil reserves are concentrated around a tiny area surrounding

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the Persian Gulf, an area in close proximity to Russia. He then asserts that there were both economic and geopolitical reasons for the West to court favour with the Islamist Right during the Cold War.

Indeed, if Dreyfuss's narrative is to be believed, the West has for over a century supported fundamentalist Islamist activist groups against left-wing Arab Nationalism, which was a natural ally of Communism.

IS ISLAM BEING UNFAIRLY SCRUTINISED?

Both authors agree that a credible response to extremist Islamism needs to include a consideration of mainstream core religious beliefs. Writing in 2006, Dreyfuss's words will be seen by many as relevant today when he asserts that societal change is needed in cultures that causes millions 'to think that back-to-basics fundamentalism is somehow an answer to twenty-first century problems and concerns'.¹ He states that such populations must engage in 'religion building' and not just 'nation building' such that Muslim scholars, philosophers, and social scientists can agree a 21st century vision of a tolerant modern Islam to create a new culture, no longer held hostage by self-dealing mullahs and ayatollahs. He believes a consensus can emerge organically in the Muslim world that reinterprets ancient texts and traditions in a manner appropriate to an enlightened world outlook. Ali agrees and goes further in calling for a modern-day Martin Luther who could lead a Muslim reformation in the same way that Luther led a Christian reformation. However, I sensed a crucial difference in emphasis between the two authors. Dreyfuss does not single out Islam for reformation and states that fundamentalism, whether it is in the form of the Islamist Right, the US's Christian Right, or Israel's ultra-orthodox settler movement, is always a reactionary force. However, Ali singles out Islam as most in need of a reformation and it was within the dogma of such views that I sensed a paradox. Ali has written with great insight regarding the human rights abuses either conducted in the name of, or hidden by, religion. However, in asserting

the superiority of the other monotheistic religions, Ali has unnecessarily reduced the force of her argument, not least because those of Muslim faith could legitimately question whether the abuses she alludes to are any less moral than (for example) recent reporting regarding the cover-up of the practice of paedophilia in the Roman Catholic priesthood.

REFORM AND PROGRESS

The common challenge from these books was for religious orthodoxy to constantly re-evaluate, reform, and progress to both stay relevant and avoid harm. While straightforward to write, I reflected upon how difficult this would be to achieve in practice. I tried to imagine a future society in which literal interpretations of sacred texts were to be reinterpreted for the benefit of public health. Is it realistic to expect religious leaders of all faiths to sit down with those of 'no-faith' and 'post-faith' to put aside prejudice and pre-received doctrine? And to create an environment of free thought in which metaphor or symbolism could be conferred upon texts that are fundamentally incompatible with a God who is otherwise portrayed as all-loving, knowing, and wise?

Who would be the 'expert voices'? How inclusive would the debate be? How would such a debate change our practice as GPs? Would some individuals find a change in paradigm psychologically distressing with the presentation of such distress in our surgeries? If so, would we have access to the necessary support groups?

CONCLUSION

Ali and Dreyfuss have challenged traditionally-held taboos regarding no discussion of political or religious issues because a literalist interpretation of sacred texts is leading to a loss of life. They have encouraged me to believe that this is everyone's debate. For any one party to state that the other does not hold an informed opinion on account of not having shared the lived experience of the other is not credible. Although it is unlikely that you will agree with all that is written, I am

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confident that these books will help develop a more culturally and politically informed practice of medicine.

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