

Preventing That Which We Fear: The Church's Role in Countering Radicalization

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The threat of Islamic radicalization is a poignant global fear. Al Qaeda and Islamic State (ISIS) are products of years of collective Muslim angst as many Muslims feel a sense of longing to restore corporate honor. Others doubt their religion. The Iraq and Syrian conflicts have spurred a great refugee crisis and the Middle East broils. Christians and Muslims alike fear for the future of the region. In the midst of chaos, the Church speaks a powerful alternative narrative and is growing exponentially.

In the West, after mass migration hit a peak in late 2015, the volume of isolationist rhetoric, vitriolic fear, and blatant ethnocentrism increased markedly. The preferred scapegoat was the Middle Eastern Arab Muslim refugee, often depicted as a radical.

The lack of gospel-centric voices in the West amidst of these growing trends is disappointing. Nationalistic responses and fear-based reactions even among prominent evangelicals abound.¹ What has escaped notice is the story of the Middle Eastern indigenous church *in situ* that is quietly serving refugees. Middle Eastern churches pondered what to do in 2011 as Syrians began flooding into Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan. Some left, fearing what may come, while many others stayed and decided to serve their perceived enemies. What resulted is a massive spiritual movement and also a prevention and sometimes a reversal of radicalization.

I propose that we have much to learn from the gospel-centric responses of the Middle Eastern church. The church, though theological at its core, has a leading, practical, salt and light role to play in preventing radicalization and the spread of Islamic extremism as a direct positive consequence of the Great Commission. She can, in faithfully carrying out her core mission, quite possibly prevent her greatest fears.

Understanding Islamic Radicalization

Islamic societies, at their pinnacle in the eighth through thirteenth century Golden Age, are now characterized by poverty, war, human rights atrocities, sluggish economies, lack of innovation, and corrupt leadership.² Wahabism, The Taliban, Al Qaeda, and ISIS seem to be attempts to restore corporate honor. Radical Islam and Political Islam are

a call to reformation, a return to the ways of the prophet. The Wahabist movement, which has become “almost mainline Sunni Islam,”³ takes its cues from a desire to emulate Mohammad and the *Salaf*, ‘devout forefathers.’ Though there are certainly theological roots to the current issues, other factors are also at play.

Radicalization is the “process by which an individual or group comes to adopt increasingly extreme political, social, or religious ideals ... that reject or undermine the status quo or undermine contemporary ideas and expressions of freedom of choice.”⁴ Numerous factors such as grievances, isolation, hatred, and the dissolving of social structures contribute to an environment that nurtures radicalization. A common stereotype is that poverty is directly responsible for radicalization. According to research there is no statistical correlation, this is a myth.⁵

While there are identifiable differences in the corollary factors and process of radicalization *in situ* in the Middle East vs. in Europe and the West, the Keen and Hamilton synthesis of three drivers seem to be universal:

1. A perceived grievance (injustice, oppression, socio-economics etc.) un-addressed in normal channels that results in hopelessness.
2. Exposure to an extremist narrative that offers a compelling rationale for what must be done about the grievance.
3. A social network with charismatic leadership that creates a sense of belonging and offers membership.⁶

On-the-ground experience in the Middle Eastern context may vary. In

Lebanon a prominent church leader who disciples former radicals gives his understanding of factors leading to radicalization among Sunni and Kurdish refugees:⁷

1. Extreme poverty and family financial assistance from militant groups.
2. A social network of young men including drugs and alcohol.
3. A connection to a Sheikh whose rhetoric entices hatred and invites *Jihad*.
4. Theological promises of paradise and practical benefits such as finance and employment for family members.
5. Transition of influence from parents to a network of passionate peers.

Scholars teaching extreme Islamist doctrine are not relegated to online platforms. Recently, Ibrahim Issa, a leading Muslim journalist and TV personality in Egypt, responding to the bombing of St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in December, 2016 was taken off the air by the Egyptian government, for highlighting that the roots of these terrorist acts are not extremist individuals, but the very educational and religious system that propagates hatred such as such as Al-Azhar in Cairo, viewed widely as the center of Islamic thinking.⁸

In Europe, the pathway is different. Many share a “frustration and resentment against society” and the majority come from second generation Muslims born in Europe, while the second highest category is converts.⁹ Most are delinquent youth, with petty criminal histories who seem to defy their parents to join a youth-culture movement. A study of



Mehran, Iran

French radicals indicates that they are more attracted by a youth-culture brotherhood amalgam mix of Call of Duty, sensationalized vengeance, and a sense of belonging than the theology of Islam. In fact, Dr. Roy Oliver states strongly, “ultra-left or radical ecology is too bourgeois and intellectual for them ... many jihadists don’t give a damn about theology.”¹⁰

The caricature of a theologically motivated Muslim terrorist may be a false stereotype. Despite the significant research of Graeme Wood eliciting the theological aspiration of ISIS higher-ups,¹¹ the common story in the West may indeed be more related to gang culture, and less to Islam. Or, in the least, there is a marked difference between the “common radical” and the upper echelons of extreme Islamic theologians.

In Western contexts, where socio-economics are much more amiable, isolation and a limited sense of belonging to the majority culture are very present. Numerous refugee families immigrating to the United States share that they are never invited into an “American” home. Social-structure upheaval can wield a significant force for positive and negative change in individuals and families. Isolation from social networks and loss of connections can open people to new ideas, in some cases Christianity and in others,

Islamist influences.¹²

Sometimes this openness to change expresses itself in increased religiosity. A formerly non-practicing Muslim may find solace and belonging at a local mosque and become more devout. In other cases, immigrants may leave the religious identity of their homeland and become more agnostic¹³ or open to a new ways of thinking after encountering a sense of belonging in community. Some become influenced to change their thinking on theological and spiritual issues. In an increasing number of cases, Muslim refugees are open to learning about Jesus.

While the violent teachings of some Islamic leaders should not be downplayed, the phenomena of a full progression of radicalization through to violent action is somewhat rare. We must not assume every Muslim is a threat. As Muslims grapple with their world in chaos due to war, and under threats of death are told by extremists they are not ‘real Muslims’, they face a fork in the road. It is disheartening that Americans, with hundreds of years of built up angst, have responded more in-kind instead of congruent with their Judeo-Christian roots.

Radicalization in America

Though negative sentiment towards

Muslims seems to have reached a peak, the phenomenon is not new. The American church has struggled with an oxymoronic approach to Muslims since its earliest days.¹⁴ American Christians have viewed Islam as a global threat while concurrently desiring to see Muslims come to faith since the pre-revolutionary period. Piracy and kidnapping in North Africa by the Barbary pirates was a fear as the nation was born. Islam became a focal villain archetype for eschatological predictions in pre-revolutionary America. These perceptions were burned in the American psyche during the formative revolutionary years of nation-birth as notable authors and preachers “perceived Muslims as both a military threat to their fledgling mercantile democracy and one of Christianity’s great eschatological enemies.”¹⁵ It was rare to hear missiological voices such as Samuel Zwemer who called people on mission to love Muslims.

Israel’s prominence in American Evangelical thinking after 1948 further deepened the perception of Muslims as enemies. Dispensationalism popularized an anti-Arab stance on most every issue. Movies, novels, and upticks in global terrorism, especially the September 11, 2001 attacks, cemented the antagonism. Rhetoric advocating xenophobic postures has always existed, but became decidedly

mainstream in the 2015 election cycle.

Due to the politicization of refugee immigration, many uninformed Americans seem to believe that domestic terrorism incidents have been perpetrated by refugees. However, in recent events such as the shootings in San Bernadino (2015) and the Orlando night club attack (2016), the perpetrators were American-born citizens, radicalized in the United States.

Secular approaches to radicalization have been dominated by kinetic military and policing efforts and a few uneasy government programs. But these often have paradoxical effects. Military interventions in the Middle East only serve to gain sympathy among the populace for extremist causes. And many government programs have been shown to have little measurable impact.¹⁶ There is so little conclusive knowledge about radicalization in the West that fifteen years after the terrorist attacks on United States soil, the country's leaders seem to be grasping to understand what caused 9/11 in the first place.¹⁷

There have been very few successful models of counter/de-radicalization. Daniel Koehler, a recognized leader in the nascent field states: "The deradicalization field globally is more or less completely free of any working standards ... no training, no handbooks, no anything."¹⁸ Some promising efforts focus on "winning hearts and minds" through community development, addressing grievances and felt-needs.¹⁹ These few secular examples perhaps illustrate why the Church in the Middle East has been successful.

What Can the Church do?

In my experience in the Middle East, the vast majority of stories of those *exiting* the pathway of radicalization are found not in prison systems, government programs, or counseling offices, but in the context of an authentic Christian faith community. Could it be that the *most powerful* influences for societal change are not mission models but the commands of Jesus to love neighbor and enemy? Jesus' greatest commandments may well be the most powerful counter to radicalization. Qureshi, the late Christian-convert apologist, stated emphatically, "I ask your pardon, but I really do feel that the Christian teaching of loving one's enemies even in the face of death, might perhaps be the most powerful answer to jihad at our disposal today."²⁰ Could it be the Church, in living out a biblical ecclesiology could play an influential, leading role in creating communities of belonging, providing a source of proactive

help in resolving grievances, and caring for real needs?

I find the types of questions many Westerners ask regarding Islam and Muslims come from a place of fear, evidenced by theological curiosity about the inner-workings of Sunni doctrine or Mohammad's life. These questions belie a desire to confirm the enemy status of Muslims and legitimize fear. What is sadly absent in many spheres is a desire to understand the grievances and social situations of the Muslim cohort, and figure out how to apply the teaching of Jesus.

The biblical model of hospitality (*philoxenia*) is sorely lacking and the Church seems blind to its contributions to the problem. Unfortunately, in most cases, the Church and evangelical leaders have looked to government as the primary actor in dealing with the threat of radicalization. They have also been some of the loudest voices unnecessarily denigrating Islam and promoting a fear of Muslims and refugee immigrants rather than calling the Church to love neighbor and love enemy. In so doing, the Church has compounded factors leading to radicalization, and deepened the polarization between Muslim and Christian communities. Accad says: "This fear of ISIS infiltration is rubbish. The church is called to be hospitable, regardless of consequences ... when churches are the church to refugees, they are actually preventing the greatest fear we have of refugees: radicalization."²¹

The famous question from a first century Jewish scholar, "who is my neighbor?" is echoed today. The most learned Christian leaders struggle to apply these basic principles when they should be leaning into one of the most poignant opportunities in decades to demonstrate the love of Jesus to Muslims and prevent radicalization. There is a better way. The solution is a return to the teachings of Jesus.

Learning from the Middle Eastern Church

Lebanon now has the highest percentage of refugees in the world—more than one million or one in four persons are from Syria or Iraq, fleeing ISIS and civil war.²² In Beirut, a church of seventy people started serving Syrian refugees at the very beginning of the conflict. Church leaders entertained various options for ministry, and there were loud voices of resistance due to long standing historical conflicts between the Lebanese and Syrians. Ultimately, the church engaged and began food and medical assistance,

education programs, and visitation ministries. The church, now nine years later, has planted three new churches among Iraqi and Syrian refugee populations and has an average weekly attendance of one thousand five hundred. They serve thousands of families and influence an audience of millions via satellite and digital media. Many other churches have similar stories and are bursting at the seams.

One man, Yaser moved his family to the Bekka valley for safety, and went back to Syria to fight with ISIS. Through the love of Christ, visits, and food provided by a local church, Yaser's family followed Jesus and he later chose to renounce *jihad*. He now serves with the ministry that cared for his family, even delivering food to ethnic Christians in the Bekka, whom he formerly considered *kafir* (infidels). In the South of Lebanon, Saleh, an Iraqi Shia, chose to follow Jesus and now serves with a large Christian non-profit in education, relief, and even leads Bible studies in refugee camps.

The Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development serves refugees in education, relief and children's advocacy through a network of fifty partner churches in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. All have grown and most now are majority Muslim background congregations. These stories of transformation are not unique to the small coastal country. In Egypt, Jordan, Iraq and Syria churches are also seeing growth from Muslim converts, many of them former Islamists.

We are seeing today one of the greatest movements among Muslims since Java.²³ According to churches and Christian organizations in the Middle East and North Africa there have been over 309,000 new believers in just the last few years.²⁴ Other Arab leaders estimate there are "millions" of new believers via social media, satellite, and online churches.²⁵ The advent of ISIS, the resulting refugee crisis, and a ready social structure in the Church expressing the love of Christ in host societies have converged under the sovereignty of God to great effect.

Not all who have been cared for by churches choose to follow Jesus, but the 'salt' of love and good deeds does its preserving work resulting in moderation in many Muslim communities as they observe compassionate acts. The reception of aid and help creates a dissonance from what many Muslims have been taught that can change prospective extremists. This 'salt and light' affect should not be downplayed as a mere side effect, for historically, in communities across the



Beirut, Lebanon

world, the Church has influenced massive societal changes when she has been faithful to the teachings of Jesus.

As a direct positive consequence of loving neighbor, loving enemy and obedience to the Great Commission, not only has a movement emerged, but many extremists and those at risk of radicalization have become positively contributing citizens in their communities. Certainly conversion is not strictly necessary for counter/de-radicalization but we ought not overlook the net positive social benefits of the church's contribution in this milieu.

Christians have a leading role to play in preventing radicalization. May the Church carry out her mission and be known by a similarity to Jesus rather than polemics. May she engage refugees and other religious groups with compassion, a willingness to advocate, and true hospitality. In so doing the Church may very well prevent the very thing it fears. ☒

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Notes

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