

Article

The Radical Need of a Critical Language: On Radical Islam

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Abstract: This article is concerned with the academic use and definitions of terms such as “radical” and “extreme” as well as “Islam” and “Muslim(s)”. Some scholars hold that such terms ought to be avoided, but the author argues to the contrary. The article probes into effects that our usage of such terms may have in society at large. As scholars of religion, we need to keep the relational aspects of our terminology in mind, and the author argues that a clear benchmark is necessary when using a value-laden terminology. That would make it possible to avoid an apologetic or uncritical stance toward the object of study, which is part of being a critical, analytical, as well as responsible scholar.

Keywords: radical; extreme; relational terminology; apologetic research; critical study of religions; Islam; Muslim

1. What Is Extreme?

How should we define “radical”? Or “extreme”? How should we define “Muslim(s)” or “Islam”? Or “religion”? What consequences may our use of terminology have? Research shows that an uncritical use of terminology and expressions such as “radical Islam” leads to an increasing fear of Muslims, Islamophobia, and a general othering of Muslims (Hoewe and Bowe 2018). Radical Islam is often equated with terrorism. A radical Muslim is suspected of being a terrorist. In extension, a Muslim is understood as being at least a potential terrorist. This is the backdrop condition for this short article, which focuses on Salafism, and terms often associated with it. The main concern addressed in the article is what we, as scholars of religion, are going to do about this problem. I argue that we need to uphold a critical and analytical language and avoid being apologetic, and in this way be able to use terms such as “extreme”, but as analytical and not value-laden terms.

2. The Dangers of “Radical”

The use of the term “radical Islam” in media is often associated with “terrorism”, which may cause an increase in Islamophobia: “[. . .] framing of the terms ‘radical Islam’ and ‘terrorism’ may perpetuate Muslim terrorist stereotypes, increasing Islamophobic attitudes and support for religiously targeted policies” (Hoewe and Bowe 2018, p. 2). Thus, use of terminology may have concrete social and political consequences. As Jennifer Hoewe and Brian J. Bowe claim: “As the term ‘radical Islam’ becomes equivalently used and understood with terrorism, it may be a short step to making the term ‘Islam’ generally equivalent with its radical counterpart” (Hoewe and Bowe 2018, p. 15). Thus, the use of terminology may have societal consequences of a far-reaching character. It may strengthen a sense of understanding Islam as a monolithic threat to “us”. It is thus clearly not a neutral terminology. Hoewe and Bowes argue that: “The uncritical adoption of this term in news content may make it difficult for counterframes to emerge, which advances the othering of Muslims in public discourse” (Hoewe and Bowe 2018, p. 14). From this background, we understand that we need to reflect carefully on the analytical concepts that we use and take responsibility for the outcomes of our research. However, we need to note as well that in an academic article, it is much “easier” to uphold a nuanced and critical discussion of



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the used terminology. A journalist or reporter does normally not have the same space to elaborate.

3. Being a Responsible Scholar

One ethical aspect that needs to be emphasized is that scholars must reflect upon how their research may be used by others. Scholars who work on topics related to religion, politics or violence most likely have reflected upon this. Responsible research and innovation (RRI) is primarily discussed in science and technology disciplines, but the same questions are relevant in the humanities and social sciences. Acknowledging the positive outcomes and impact of research, those working from within the frames of RRI wish to stress that the outcomes “sometimes create new risks and ethical dilemmas” (RRI website n.d.).

Some academic associations have written codes of ethics. For example, the International Sociological Association (ISA) stresses that research should be critical and that sociologists should be aware that they may have an impact on society. I hold that what the ISA stresses is relevant also for scholars who are not sociologists. “Sociologist” could be replaced by another term, such as “scholar of religion”, in the following citation:

Sociologists should be aware of the fact that their assumptions may have an impact upon society. Hence their duty is, on the one hand, to keep an unbiased attitude as far as possible, while, on the other hand, to acknowledge the tentative and relative character of the results of their research and not to conceal their own ideological position(s). No sociological assumption should be presented as indisputable truth. (ISA website n.d.)

Furthermore, a critical approach must be sustained: “Sociologists should act with a view to maintaining the image and the integrity of their own discipline; this does not imply that they should abandon a critical approach toward its fundamental assumptions, its methods and its achievements” (ISA website n.d.).

One section in the ISA code of ethics comments on extra-scientific use of research, which is relevant to address here:

The results of sociological inquiries may be a matter of public interest. Their diffusion, which is an implication of the fundamental right of people to be informed, should not be hindered. Researchers, however, should be aware of the dangers connected with distortions, simplifications and manipulations of their own research material, which may occur in the process of communication through individual or mass media. Researchers should be able, and are entitled, to intervene to correct any kind of misinterpretation or misuse of their work. (ISA website n.d.)

It is essential that we use and promote a critical study of religions, which not only includes but also builds on an analytical language that enables us to make critical and comparative studies. As I argue in the article, a critical perspective means that we must avoid confessional or value-laden, both negative and positive, comments on Islam (or what empirical material we may use). If we were to produce value-laden or apologetic comments, the result would be that we would take an active part in the continuing debate regarding the construction of what true Islam is (or at least what good Islam is). If we wish to uphold a critical and scholarly approach, we need to think carefully about how our results may be used and publish our results with this in mind. I address and expand on these issues below.

4. Apologetic Stances

Scholars studying political forms of Islam may be afraid that their publications will be extra-scientifically used by populist parties and individuals to spread sensationalist or alarmist images of Islam and Muslims in order to scare the general population or to affect the political climate and debate. We are all aware of this risk. A solution, however, is neither to study merely “nice” and peaceful forms of religion or religiosity in order to

counter this image nor to apologetically claim that some forms of Islam is not truly Islamic. I further argue that we should also not avoid terminology that has become value-laden, and that is used by journalists, politicians, and populists. Such strategies of “avoidance” may constitute scholarly “risk management”, but in my view, it is inappropriate and not in line with a scholarly code of ethics. In the following, I address the scholarly tendency to make apologetic claims.

First, I would like to stress that we should study “nice” forms of Islam, too. However, that does not mean that we should avoid studying “bad” forms of Islam. We should not avoid conducting research on violent expressions of any religious tradition merely because we fear extra-scientific usages of our results. Moreover, we should never evaluate what is true/false Islam, or a good/bad interpretation or practice. If somebody comments on such things in their role as an academic, this does certainly not contribute to a nuanced and critical research.

M. Cherif Bassiouni is one example of how violent interpretations of Islam are presented as un-Islamic: “This is violence in the name of Islam, but not violence permitted by Islam” (Bassiouni 2015, p. 651). Bassiouni declares that it is “misguided knowledge about Islam” that has motivated violence:

The contemporary phenomenon of violence by Muslims reveals a strong link between populist theological and doctrinal teachings to ideologically motivated violence. This is largely due to the level of ignorance and/or misguided knowledge about Islam among the masses in the Muslim world. (Bassiouni 2015, p. 650)

Other publications are explicit about having apologetic aims attempting to combat what appears to be understood by the authors as a distorted theological narrative of Islam. Fethi Mansouri and Zuleyha Keskin, for example, speak of the “misguided theological notions adapted and adopted by leaders of these groups in communicating their messages to the world and in drafting their narratives for recruiting followers and members from across the globe” (Mansouri and Keskin 2019, p. 3). In their edited volume, *Contesting the Theological Foundations of Islamism and Violent Extremism*, several chapters are devoted to this apologetic mission.

As stated, as an academic scholar of religion, it is important to avoid any truth-claims pertaining to what is the true essence, or interpretation, of any religious tradition. One may sympathize with the attempts to do so, but it reflects a view that true (or at least good) religion is necessarily non-violent and peaceful. If we reject apologetic perspectives and recognize that religion is a social and human construction, we may avoid such mistakes. (See also (Olsson and Stenberg 2015; Olsson and Stenberg 2020) for a discussion on engaged research.) If we follow the description of how the study of religions ought to be conducted, as formulated by the International Association for the History of Religions, this mistake can be avoided:

The IAHR seeks to promote the activities of all scholars, member and affiliate associations and societies contributing to the historical, social, and comparative study of religion. As such, the IAHR is the preeminent international forum for the critical, analytical and cross-cultural study of religion, past and present. The IAHR is not a forum for confessional, apologetical, or other similar concerns. (IAHR website n.d.)

5. Religion or Politics

Above, we have stated that the study of religions should be a critical and non-confessional endeavor, excluding political or theological positioning. However, this is not always an easy task to perform in practice. We have all felt the need to say at least that: “Not all Muslims think/act like that” or “Only a minority holds that this is correct Islam.” Such statements are important and used with the intention to contribute to avoiding generalizations and stereotyping Muslims. One explicit example of this is found in a Canadian security report:

In a contemporary context, radicalization is most often discussed with reference to young Muslims who are influenced, to one degree or another, by Islamist thought. Islamism (the practical application of Islamist thought), a term that is NOT a synonym for Islam, is a set of ideologies that holds that Islam is not simply a religion, but also a political system. (RCMP 2009, p. 2)

As scholars of religion, we can note in the citation that a distinction is made between religion and politics, which is problematic, but often the case in reports of this kind. This partition between religion and politics has been discussed by Asad (1993), stating that no universal definitions of religion is valid, and that we must realize they too are constructions made from within a specific historical circumstance. The separation between religion and politics is a result of the Western separation of domains of power, where religion is understood from a Christian genealogy, and where religion is to be kept separate from political power. Mohammed Sulaiman stresses that this view on religion is Eurocentric and has dominated the study of Islam and Muslims, and it has, furthermore, constituted the “Western norm” that has affected analyses of some religions as natural and others not (Sulaiman 2019, pp. 77–78). This view on religion and politics as separate fields that it is possible to combine may serve heuristic analyses and is as such useful, but we need to reflect on the ideological modernistic assumptions that underlie this perspective. In the above citation from the Canadian security report, Islam is described as a religion, while Islamism is more than that, since it is also claiming to be a political system.

In the same report, radicalization is presented as a movement going from moderate beliefs toward extreme views that may constitute threats to national security:

Radicalization is the critical subset of the terrorist threat. The RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police] defines radicalization as the process by which individuals—usually young people—are introduced to an overtly ideological message and belief system that encourages movement from moderate, mainstream beliefs towards extreme views. While radical thinking is by no means problematic in itself, it becomes a threat to national security when [. . .] citizens or residents espouse or engage in violence or direct action as a means of promoting political, ideological or religious extremism. (RCMP 2009, p. 1)

Here, too, we can note that a differentiation between categories such as religion and politics are taken for granted, and that “moderate” belief is fine, but engagement in violent beliefs or actions is not. In a report of this kind, we should perhaps not require an extended discussion on the concepts or perspectives, but, as scholars of religion, we need to avoid such unproblematized value laden categorizations in order to be critical academics. Being critical here includes keeping up an academic language, with well-defined expressions, concepts, and typologies.

6. Epistemological Perspectives

Let us now proceed to the contemporary scholarly field that concerns this topic and focus on research that concerns terminology related to radicalization and Islam in order to attempt to sort things out. Perhaps somewhat categorically stated, it is possible to divide current research on Islam and violence-related questions into two epistemological stances with differing theoretical underpinnings. One is characterized by reductionist (or orientalist) perspectives, where a direct relationship between Islam and violence is sought, for example, through a focus on textual readings and historical (i.e., older) examples. The other is more complex and stresses lived experience and the changing nature of Islam related to the historical situation, and Islam as an explanatory factor is left out of the analysis (Sulaiman 2019, pp. 75–76). Both epistemological stances understand Islamic violence as a “violation of the religious-secular divide”, which is the “Western norm”, as discussed above (Sulaiman 2019, p. 78).

Mohammed Sulaiman presents a number of scholars within the reductionist field, such as Bernard Lewis, Daniel Pipes, Emmanuel Sivan, and Samuel Huntington. The work of such scholars produces an image of the “good” Muslim as one who reinvents Islam

to fit the “Western norm”. However, the “real” (“bad”) Muslim, or “authentic” Islam, is regressive, ideological, and anti-modern (unlike Christianity) and connected to violence through such a reductionist understanding:

As they interpret Muslim acts of violence to be a consequence of an objective, unmediated and scientific interpretation of classical Islamic texts and as representing a seamless continuity with classic Islamic history, Orientalists provide their readers with what they perceive to be the real, authentic Islam. In turn, this unadulterated form of Islam produces the essential (bad) Muslim. Consequently, ‘good’ Muslims are only good to the extent that their Islam is reinvented and remodelled to fit within the ‘universal’ template of Western, liberal modernity. In other words, according to this view, a good Muslim is only one who, by accepting the superiority of Western cultural formations, has managed to depart from the archetype of the bad ‘real’ Muslim. (Sulaiman 2019, p. 80)

Such perspective may lead to a generalization of all Muslims, where “every Muslim is deemed to be intrinsically at risk of being ‘radicalised’ (thus, becoming a real threat) due to the innate appeal of radical Islam to Muslims” (Sulaiman 2019, p. 84).

In a similar vein, but from a more explicit confessional and apologetic point of view, Tibi (2012) considers political Islam, or Islamism, to be a distortion of the peaceful nature of Islam, and he connects the problem to the category “ideology”, as a cause to violence. He considers Islamism to be a falsification of Islam, and we can note how a differentiation is made by him between ideology and religion. Islam as ideology (i.e., not religion in his view) is understood as what makes people resort to violence. Islam as ideology is considered to be inherently violent and monolithic (Sulaiman 2019, pp. 84–85). Sulaiman holds that as a result, “all non-liberal, non-secular interpretations of Islam are considered ‘warped’ and anti-modern (i.e. ideological, fundamentalist, extremist), and their followers become deviant subjects and potential threats” (Sulaiman 2019, p. 84).

The anti-reductionist stance emphasizes Islamic diversity and heterogeneity. Islam is no longer an explanatory factor; instead, external aspects, such as socioeconomic and material contexts, are stressed (Sulaiman 2019, p. 86). Scholars in this stance are, for example, Edward Said, Fred Halliday, Nazih Ayubi, Sami Zubaida, and John Esposito. Sulaiman argues that anti-reductionists too fail to historicize the universalized liberal model. Anti-reductionists emphasize the political context and disregard that texts and history do have significance (Sulaiman 2019, p. 88). In the next section, we turn to the contemporary positions occupied by scholars on radical forms of Islam and focus on contemporary Salafism because it is the most researched form of political Islamic interpretations and practices today, drawing interest from a wide range of academic disciplines, not only the study of religions.

7. Two Positions on Salafism

To generalize, there are two dominating positions among academics concerning “radical Islam”, or Salafism. They are the “anthropological” and the “security” perspectives, or positions. The first is concerned with the study of humans, often in localized and small-context case studies. The second is more often concerned with discussing analytical issues related to Islam as a potential security threat. The first tends to be somewhat apologetic. The other somewhat sensationalist, drawing on people’s fears. The anthropological and security positions thus focus on different aspects, but taken together, they may bring a more nuanced picture of the phenomena under study.

The question addressed in this section is whether Salafism as a whole ought to be considered a security threat or not. What about Salafi groups that explicitly and publicly promote Islam as a non-violent religion and actively work against the use of violence, distancing themselves from Jihadi groups and violently inclined ideologies? Are Salafis wolves in sheep’s clothing? Are violent and non-violent extremism merely two sides of the same coin? (Schmid 2014) Should we really be scared of all Salafists in Europe? (Roex 2014, p. 51).

7.1. Anthropological Views

Anthropological views underscore the need to avoid generalized and simplistic “stereotypes” of Islam and Muslims. This is of course an important scholarly task. We need to recognize that fundamentalist religious interpretations are not homogeneous. They are just as diverse and complex as any other field of interpretation.

Representing the anthropologist position, Roex (2014) holds that it is important to distinguish between different Salafi types in terms of security policy. She holds that it is problematic to present Salafism by definition as a security threat and a threat to democracy (Roex 2014, p. 51). From this perspective, it is necessary to nuance the image and note that not all Salafis call for violent jihād. In her research, Roex concludes that political detachment found among some Salafis may result in societal detachment. However, she holds that this is not primarily a security problem (Roex 2014, p. 57). She therefore does not consider it “fair to consider the entire Salafi movement as security threat, and a threat to the democratic system” (Roex 2014, p. 59).

This kind of anthropological research is not necessarily apologetic or uncritical. However, it may appear as somewhat naïve, especially if you would be a scholar inside the frames of the security perspective. What Roex attempts to do is to nuance the image of Salafism, to illustrate that it is not a monolithic phenomenon. She does so through solid empirical research, and she successfully nuances the image of Salafism. A question is still how the call for social detachment, even among the non-jihadis, so easily can be said not to be a security problem or in the long run a threat to democracy. Scholars with security perspectives would most likely disagree with her analysis.

7.2. Security Perspectives

Security perspectives stress that all forms of “radicalization” are potential security threats. That means that all forms of Salafism are understood as potential threats to societal security. Roex would most likely consider such a hypothesis to be un-nuanced, generalized, and simplistic, contributing to a sensationalist image of Salafis. Director of the Terrorism Research Initiative, Alex P. Schmid, is one scholar who mentions that Salafism come in different forms, but he stresses that even non-jihadis are “incompatible” with West European principles of modern liberal-democratic societies.

Salafists can be apolitical (quietist), political (reformist) or militant (jihadist). However, even in their non-jihadist variant, their fundamentalist value system is extreme by the prevailing norms of West European societies and widely considered incompatible with core principles of modern liberal-democratic societies such as the separation of state and religion, popular sovereignty, gender equality, respect for minority rights and acceptance of laws decided upon by a majority of people. (Schmid 2014, p. 15)

Non-violent Salafism functions as a kind of “conveyor belt” leading toward violently inclined extremism in Schmid’s view (Schmid 2014, pp. 2, 16). From this perspective, Salafi teaching and practice in general can be described as anti-democratic and anti-integrative, and as such, it poses a threat to democratic rule. From this perspective, Salafism is considered to support isolationism, enclavism, and exclusivism. Schmid argues that a:

fundamentalist value system is extreme by the prevailing norms of West European societies and widely considered incompatible with core principles of modern liberal-democratic societies such as the separation of state and religion, popular sovereignty, gender equality, respect for minority rights and acceptance of laws decided upon by a majority of people. (Schmid 2014, p. 15)

Thus, we see that research conducted within the frames of security perspectives, even Salafis who stress purity, piety, and non-violence as main methods, are seen as extremists with maximalist goals, and their peaceful *da’wah* (mission) is considered a strategy and a tactical choice to push their Islamic agenda (Schmid 2014, p. 18).

8. Toward a Conclusion

In the article, I have argued that we as scholars should uphold a critical and non-apologetic language, which includes using terms such as “radical” and “extreme” as relational, not value-laden, analytical concepts. The examples given have mainly been related to Salafi Islam and research on Salafism as a threat or violently inclined. The reason is that this research area attracts a lot of attention from scholars today, and the field is relevant to the topic of the article. In doing so, it is not my intention to claim that Islam is not a heterogeneous tradition. The intention has only been to limit the material and choose examples that are suitable to address due to the aims of the article. In the anthropological approach, we have seen that scholars strive to nuance the image of Salafism and to avoid generalizations. The question of “radical” is not explicitly asked in the anthropological research mentioned here. Within the security approach, the question of extremism is in the center, which may explain the differences in argumentation between the two “positions”. The aims of research differ, and therefore, outcomes of research differ.

But how should we reason around using the concept “radical” then? First of all, we need to acknowledge that “radical” is a relational concept. What is designated as radical refers to something that is not regarded as a norm. The following citation from David R. Mandel illustrates this relational aspect of concepts such as “radical”:

The modern concept of radicalization would thus appear to support a form of relativist thinking about socio-political events and actors related to the problem of terrorism. To be radical is to be extreme relative to something that is defined or accepted as normative, traditional, or valued as the status quo. The relative notion is important in the present context because it indicates that agreement on what is to be defined as radical may be subject to ‘perspective effects’. That is, what one group may regard as radical forms of thought and behavior may not be seen as radical by the purveyors of those forms of thought and behavior. (Mandel 2009, p. 105)

From this background, it is not surprising that governmental agencies define radicalization as a threat to the existing order, and often related to “extremism”: “The relative notion of extremism, including the threat to the existing order posed by extremism, is evident in some governmental attempts to define radicalization” (Mandel 2009, p. 106). If we, as scholars, are to use such concepts as analytical terms, we therefore need to define the “benchmark”, and clarify what we regard to be “mainstream” or “normal”. That is what we compare “radical” with, in order to conclude that it is radical, from our analytical and comparative perspective (see (Schmid 2014, p. 11)).

Salafism is a type of Islam that is fundamentalist (related to views on sources and interpretation). Salafism is a highly conservative interpretation of Islam. Anabel Inge in her research on Muslim Salafi women describes the purist and inflexible approach within the non-violent puritan Salafi environment that she studied.

This uncompromising, purist approach is reflected in the inflexibility of attitudes and behaviours that religious seekers encounter upon entering Salafi environments. But this, too, while initially off-putting, can serve as a confirmation that the group takes Islam seriously. (Inge 2017, p. 91)

Salafism in all its forms, violent or non-violent, aims to change the subjectivities of adherents and make them accept a Salafi worldview and rules for practice.

Salafi teachings actually encourage followers to understand their journey into Salafism as a radical identity renegotiation. They specify such strict conditions for a person to be considered ‘truly’ Muslim that even some of the women who had been brought up as Muslims no longer believed that they had deserved to be identified as such. (Inge 2017, p. 62)

This is of course not unique for Salafism, but a trait in most ideological environments. Concerning the analytical term “ideology”, it is here used as “a grand idea around which people cluster” and it “functions as a social system to organize and educate people, mo-

ativating them to develop certain attitudes, adopt certain worldviews, and seek, through collective action, certain objectives" (Rabie 2013, p. 127). Mohamed Rabie describes ideology as a tool for group cohesion and delimitation:

Since ideology represents the core of many cultures, it tends to shape the attitudes of people, causing them to feel different from others, sometimes superior to them, and sharpen their collective sense of identity. As a consequence, ideology makes its followers more committed to the welfare of their own group or nation, and less tolerant of other groups' beliefs and convictions, giving them an excuse to be prejudiced, belittle others, and often discriminate against them. (Rabie 2013, p. 127)

An ideology that is value-related, such as religious sociocultural ideologies, is associated with convictions, values, and morality that can be described as existential. Such ideologies are less prone to negotiations and compromise and more ready to turn to violence, coercion, and conflict than ideologies that are interest-related, such as issues of labor or trade (Rabie 2013, pp. 128–29). The specific practice and ideology promoted by Salafis intends to alter the subjectivity of people, isolating them in an, ideally, self-contained environment, where "others" can be avoided. Researchers have stressed the strong and frequent othering tendencies among fundamentalist groups (not only Islamic ones). Othering includes an active engagement with constructing and upholding borders of the in-group. This simultaneously constructs the borders of the out-group to be avoided. Salafi ideologies are close-minded and supremacist, and, if put into practice, lead to a promotion and practice of enclavism or segregation, in order to be able to live in accordance with the ideology, and thus calling for an "extreme change of part of the social order". *Encyclopædia Britannica* portrays radical as "Radical, in politics, one who desires extreme change of part or all of the social order." (*Encyclopædia Britannica* n.d.) In *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, radical is defined as "very different from the usual or traditional". (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary* n.d.) In *Merriam-Webster Thesaurus*, radical is "being very far from the center of public opinion", and words related to it are "subversive, violent, wild, reactionary" and synonyms are "extreme, extremist, fanatic (or fanatical), rabid, revolutionary, revolutionist, ultra." (*Merriam-Webster Thesaurus* n.d.)

In a liberal democracy, a Salafi lifestyle and ideology contradicts democratic values and ideas upheld by majority populations and governments. To choose a lifestyle that avoids the surrounding society is to choose a radical and extreme position. Here, democracy and liberalism would be the benchmarks to which we compare what is extreme or radical. If we clearly state this in our research, why should we call it anything else?

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