

Hypermodern religiosity: How young Muslims embrace traditional Islam and why it has little to do with terrorism

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*The wearing of the niqab and other items of clothing that cover the face has been the subject of intense debate in several European countries, notably France where legislation has been passed in the French parliament which prohibits the concealment of an individual's face in public. **Raphaël Liogier** states that while western commentators often link the niqab to traditional Islamic values, its contemporary appeal is part of a distinctly modern trend that has more in common with 'new age' fashions than radical Islam.*



We see the words in the press every day: communitarianism, ethnic factionalism, Salafism, fundamentalism, jihadism and, seemingly, a term that encapsulates them all, radicalisation. But what is really behind these neologisms? They are used almost indiscriminately by commentators and politicians alike whenever it suits their immediate interests, but the anxiety that they inevitably arouse can be misleading.

Of course there are new manifestations of religion emerging in our societies. We have witnessed an Islamic revival, along with new forms of radicalism and neo-jihadism in recent years. Terrorism is shaping our lives, and we are currently joining forces to fight it. But to do so we must seek to understand the causes rather than merely hide them away in the Pandora's box of our fears.

These words can usefully describe real phenomena, but their almost mythic power prevents us from defining them clearly. To see them for what they are we must realise – and this is key – that behind the vague threat of a “clash of civilisations” the reality is that we have before us human beings who were born and who grew up in France or in Belgium, as well as elsewhere in Europe and the United States. These are the places where they have developed some of the aspirations and values that so concern us.

Let's begin with the most visible among them. From 2005-6 in Europe, particularly in France, young women began wearing the full face veil. They were only a few hundred at the time, but this ended up provoking a public outcry which led to the establishment of a French law prohibiting the concealment of an individual's face in a public place. But are these women really the implacable enemy that so many of us imagine them to be?

An individualistic fashion

Once we set aside the distorting lens of our fears and make an effort to look more closely at the situation, what we learn about these women is actually quite surprising. Generally, their choice of traditional dress is well considered and highly personal. They engage in a thoroughly modern discourse regarding the freedom to believe or not to believe, and they employ it skilfully to defend their radical “spiritual commitment”.

The majority of them are between 18 and 35 years old, and most were born in France, often in families of North African or sub-Saharan African descent. For the most part, they have not grown up in particularly rigorous or purist religious environments; somewhat paradoxically, they have often been compelled to defend their decision to their perplexed families. They tend not to join Islamist organisations, nor are they very politically-minded. They have often studied classical Arabic, and speak mostly about spirituality and how to transform their lives. They aspire to be “completely themselves”, and typically do not plan to marry immediately, at least not before they have succeeded professionally.

They are frequently concerned about the environment, and view their commitment to eating only halal products as healthy and environmentally friendly. This kind of voluntary traditionalism is not restricted to women alone, but parallels a new pietistic Salafism in which men try to emulate the companions of the Prophet, dressing in Bedouin tunics, growing their beards, and committing themselves to strict personal discipline. Because religious fashion spreads via the Internet, such individuals, both men and women, can just as easily be found on the streets of Sydney, New York or Jakarta.

These signature traits of Muslim fundamentalism – an individualistic desire for transformative life change involving a return to core values, an ascetic discipline, special clothing and food practices, and an emphasis on environmental awareness – will sound very familiar to anyone who has come into contact with New Age culture or westernised Buddhism in their more extreme versions. The parallels are obvious. One pursues vegetarianism or veganism; the other, an uncompromising commitment to halal food. One finds discipline in the intense practice of yoga or meditation; the other in a strict sartorial and behavioural regime, in the practice of prayer and in mastering Arabic. Both share a similar ultramodern concern for personal growth, moral integrity and the public assertion of their identities.

These similarities have not been lost on businesses, who have recognised the individualism that lies at the core of such movements. Numerous boutiques are now catering to these “hypermuslims” and have transformed Rue Jean-Pierre Timbaud in Paris, for instance, into a Mecca of trendy Islam, in a similar way that certain neighbourhoods of New York or San Francisco have become centres for LGBT fashion.

This often-ignored fashion trend has resulted in the appearance of women’s magazines like *Imane* – an Islamic equivalent to *Elle* – that advise young Muslim women on how to be elegant and modern, on how to practice sport, on how to go to the beach (with a Burkini for instance), while still making choices that respect modesty and promote harmony and well-being. Major fashion companies, and even high-end brands, have rushed to catch up with this demand for “hijab couture”. And this is not an exclusively Islamic phenomenon; the movement towards modest clothing is on the rise among Christians, Jews, and Hindus as well, even if it has not been considered quite as newsworthy.

But while this new breed of individualistic fundamentalists can be found in all religions, it is perhaps more surprising in the Muslim context. Until the beginning of the 21st century, Muslim fundamentalism was above all Islamist in character, the offspring of a political ideology that arose largely in reaction to Western domination, and ranged from moderate reformism to a revolutionary vision legitimising terrorism. It may seem paradoxical, but the individualistic radicalism of the 21st century signals a new generation’s break with the militant Islamism of their elders. It is a hypermodern infiltration of Islam rather than an Islamic infiltration of modernity.

For this reason, the Islamic State is actively fighting against the imams of these new pietist movements such as the

charismatic Imam Abou Houdeyfa, nicknamed the “YouTube Imam”, who is a star among the young generation of French Muslims. These popular young imams delegitimise the call for terrorism by dictating individualistic behaviour, even if they may encourage forms of ethnic factionalism and withdrawal, much like the Amish in the United States. The leaders of Daesh have every reason to be worried.

Daesh has a very different approach – it relies on exploiting a sense of frustration. Its leaders, even though they are the ideological offspring of Al Qaeda, have adapted to a new longing for revenge and utopia found among young people who are both frustrated and eager to identify with a cause, and whose paths rarely cross the Salafists promoting a quieter form of religious renewal. Candidates for jihad are seeking a complete break – an adventure at the very least – even if they simply feel uncomfortable in their own skin, restless, alienated.

Those who have been involved in criminal activity are often suffering from guilt or social stigma and looking for immediate redemption. They are not willing to subject themselves to the intensive prayer regimes of strict young pietists, or for that matter to go every day to the mosque, much less to undertake the laborious process of learning Arabic. They seek to replace their sense of helplessness with fantasies of heroic grandeur. Articles published in *Dar Al Islam*, Daesh’s French language magazine, are targeted and effective. They paint a utopian picture of the Caliphate in a mixture of carefully selected Koranic references and anti-Western imprecations, populated with masked superhero-like characters and imbued with the aesthetic of video games and Hollywood blockbusters.

These phenomena are at once social and religious, and any attempt to categorise them exclusively as one or the other would be artificial. From the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, many thought that the victory of reason had sent religion into irreversible decline. Then came the New Age sects, the Zen meditators, the chanting neo-Hindu Hare Krishna pacifists, the Dalai Lama’s followers, millions of veiled Muslim youths, Pentecostal churches spreading in Africa, terrorists shouting Allahu Akbar. We must understand that religion arises from the irreducible desire to be transcendent, to be more than a mere thing. Religion is not violence, even if it can be used to justify violence. Nor is it peace, even if religion can promote peace. Religion is the desire for meaning.

As a result, we need to take the new hypermodern religiosity of jihad seriously. Terrorists are driven not by a desire to die, but rather a desire to live more, just like the radical vegans, like the pietist Salafists, and the neo-Buddhists. In this regard, we cannot ignore the dreams of power and feelings of impotence widely disseminated via social networks. These desires and frustrations now circulate globally, and it is in these virtual spaces that new meaning-generating narratives are born, precisely the kinds of narratives that modern nation states seem so singularly unable to sustain.

The Dalai Lama, after losing power over his Himalayan high ground, managed to build a “Cyber Tibet” that now inspires millions of people. Daesh, losing ground in the Middle East, may well follow this example and build a Cyber Caliphate, rendered all the more effective by its slick narrative of victimhood at the hands of the nihilistic and corrupt West. The worst mistake we could make would be to believe that Reason alone can dispense with utopia and transcendence. To deprive people of myths would be to suffocate them in a nihilistic void. We should not be surprised if the response is irrational violence.

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