

1071. Religion, Fundamentalism and ISIS

The enigma of ISIS

In this article I want to consider the pull of ISIS, how it is apparently successful in recruiting Western young people via social media to join in their reign of terror. How is it possible that young people raised in a normal Western environment are so susceptible to this propaganda of hate? Pundits appear to be at a loss how to explain this recent phenomenon. Possible causes range from individual mental illness to political propaganda brainwashing. But none of these quite seems to fit.

What shocks us most is how law abiding, freedom loving Canadian citizens not only participate in the barbaric practices of ISIS, but are even willing to promote them. Unquestionably the self-professed practices of ISIS (specifically the public beheading of innocent people) are pure evil. It is an enigma, therefore, how some Canadian young people in their teens and twenties are attracted to them, given the generally high level of youthful idealism in that age group. ISIS seems to have nothing to offer as a cause to pursue.

One cause that has been suggested relates to negative social conditions, like living a life of poverty and oppression. But few, if any of the Canadian recruits to ISIS were either poor or oppressed when they joined. Prior to joining ISIS they lived a life of relative privilege and freedom.

Most often ISIS is labeled as a form of extremism by the media. Beyond a doubt the barbaric propaganda actions of ISIS portrayed in social media can be called extreme. But this does not explain why some Western young people are drawn to behave in such extreme ways.

So, ISIS shocks us. Our reaction is not unlike that of Post Traumatic Stress sufferers. The vision and actions of ISIS are beyond the experience of normal, freedom loving, law-abiding people. From our perspective it *is* a form of extremism.

The search for an identity among young people

However, we also should not over estimate the pull of ISIS. Its allure is restricted to young people in their teens and twenties, and within that group only a handful succumb. Very few, if any Canadians over thirty are recruited. What makes young people vulnerable is that they are at a stage in life where they are busy developing a personal identity. Questions like: “Who am I?” “What am I good at?” “Where am I headed in my life and with whom?” dominate their lives. Most people over thirty have settled those questions and have gone on to marry, to raise a family and to build a career.

This identity problematic makes today’s young people, the so-called millennials, especially receptive to all sorts of outside influences, including the negative influence of ISIS. The global village they live in is a confusing world, in which they are faced with an

overabundance of possible choices and points of view. And no one is telling them how to live, what to believe, or what is right. It's all up to them.

Consequently, most young people today take their time, usually not until they are thirty, to commit themselves to an adult life style. As someone wrote, their twenty-something lives are characterized by “ the integrity of questioning rather than the certainty of knowing.” Paradoxically, the decision to postpone a commitment to a definite life style until later safeguards most of these young people from the indoctrination of ISIS, which is pressuring them to make a choice right now.

For some young people the pressure to commit themselves to a permanent life style may become unbearable. They have a hard time with the ambiguity of not being sure about anything. They are driven to apply premature closure to the identity question. This makes them vulnerable to the whiles of ISIS.

So, what does ISIS have to offer these young people? To answer that question we must understand, I think, that the search for an identity is more than a psychological problem. It is so life encompassing that it can only be called a spiritual quest. This fact backs us into a discussion of religion.

Religion is some times mentioned as a possible reason why these young Canadians join ISIS. They typically convert to Islam prior to joining. But this would imply that the violent acts perpetrated by ISIS are the logical extension of the religion of Islam, as if barbarism is demanded by the worship of Allah, a view that most of us find repugnant. Moreover, it does not explain why these Canadian young people would find violence permissible, or even attractive.

Before we dismiss religion as a possible cause we should remind ourselves that the expressed purpose of ISIS is to establish an Islamic State, in which many of the public behaviours, such as adherence to sharia law are derived from the religion of Islam. In our Liberal Democratic society, with its long-standing separation of church and state, and its conviction that religion is a private affair, it is incomprehensible that one should wish to promote the politicalization of religion. Such behaviour might be expected from members of a totalitarian state, we feel, but not from young people living in a free society.

Fundamentalism, the perversion of religion

Part of our inability to comprehend the pull of ISIS, I think, may lie in our lack of understanding about the proper role of religion in personal and public life. It is not as if religion is without influence in the lives of individuals or in our society. For many the benefits of practicing a religion are considerable. For them their religion provides a main source of meaning in their lives. This is why our society promotes and practices freedom of religion. For others religion is a source of division. To them it represents a form of intolerance and is for this reason incompatible with living in a democratic secular society. ISIS seems to be an extreme case in point.

To deal with this apparent paradox it may be helpful to distinguish between religion and fundamentalism. Fundamentals are formulae that refer to the essence of what one believes. More obvious examples are creeds, like the apostle's creed, or theological positions, or even the sacred writings of a religion. They also include slogans like by grace through faith, or Allah akbar. They may be ritual practices like baptism, the weekly Eucharist, or praying five times per day. They may even include symbols like a cross, a crescent, a hammer and sickle, a turban or a niqab. Each of these is dear to the believer because they are short form expressions of what one considers most sacred.

The problem of fundamentalism occurs, I think, when the formulae, the creeds, the scriptures, the slogans, the rituals and the symbols become more important for believers than the content of the faith to which these refer, when these symbols are divorced from the faith one lives and become the objects of adoration in themselves, or even when believing itself becomes the object of faith (as when we develop a confidence in confidence alone, and anxiously worship certainty). When the formulae lose their linguistic character of *referring to* actual events, actual experiences of persons, then a religion threatens to degenerate into a form of fundamentalism where the central issue becomes a form of theological correctness.

In short, fundamentalism is a perversion of lived religion, where 'lived religion' refers to what or whom we live out of and what or whom we live unto with our lives. From this perspective ISIS is a perversion of the religion of ISLAM.

The allure of ISIS for the young people it recruits, if ISIS is to be believed, is that it offers them an easy road toward certainty in their lives. There is only one way to believe, one way to live, one way to behave. ISIS demands total, unthinking loyalty, no questions asked. This is precisely what appeals to some young people mired in the turmoil of their identity problematics. Only later, when they attempt to practice this rigid life style, do they begin to realize that they have bought a pig in a poke. But by then it is too late.