Rethinking the Causal Concept
of Islamic Radicalisation

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Introduction

In the wake of 9/11 (New York), 3/11 (Madrid) and 7/7 (London) attacks, policy makers and the media have devoted a great deal of political and financial capital in debating and implementing the best ways to prevent Islamically inspired political violence in the West. These events brought a new urgency to trying to understand terrorism – and brought home to the US and UK that transnational terrorism is as much a domestic as a foreign concern. These early 21st century events left politicians, practitioners and academics trying to either contextualise these events in existing paradigms of terrorism and political violence, or search for new ways of understanding the role of religion and identity in terms of events and threats heretofore not experienced. A great deal of emotional anxiety and political capital have subsequently been spent on how to confront and defeat what has been politically and popularly conceived as Islamically inspired "terrorism". These responses have ranged from the Bush inspired "War on Terror", to more subtle though no less counter-terrorist inspired strategies in the UK (CONTEST 1 and 2).

Such reactions, whether in governments, the media, or the wider public reflect what Horgan refers to as the 'drama' of terrorism, a human understanding of the scale of death, destruction and/or property damage (Horgan, 2005: 23). This is not least apparent in push since 2001 to increase the legal powers of the state, the growth in expenditure on counter-terrorism in the name of increased security, and the public's acquiescence to these changes. This is an understandable situation. Bombs going off on trains and the underground, planes flying into buildings killing thousands, and other less deadly but no less significant occurrences of political violence pose at best a nuisance, and at worst a substantial threat to the ability of individuals to carry out their everyday lives. At a most basic and fundamental level, being maimed or killed in

the name of a political agenda is abhorrent, whether the perpetrator be an individual, a group, or a state. That political elites view protecting their citizens from such threats seems rational and reasonable, and that they might seek to develop and include academic voices is clever, efficient, and ultimately important. When academic approaches to questions of radicalisation are, however, fundamentally flawed, there follows a substantial risk that the shaping and implementation of policies on countering and preventing violence will not work, and may actually serve to intensify existing conditions which lead to such violence.

If these 21st century events have increased interest amongst politicians practitioners and academics in terrorism and counter-terrorism, what is so important about 'radicalisation'? Radicalisation, has gained theoretical traction in policy making circles as well as in the speeches of politicians in the UK and the USA. A brief examination also indicates that there is a great deal of confusion amongst policy makers and practitioners as to what the term actually means, as well as confusion over any tangible relationship between radicalisation with terrorism. At one recent academic-policy-maker/practitioner interchange, this author was told that policy-makers and practitioners knew what radicalization was when they saw it, so there was no need to spend time defining it. Given the extraordinary ease with which policy makers have invented and appropriated terminology for political purposes during the course of the 'War on Terror', the task of seeking conceptual clarity acquires significant policy relevancy (Jackson, 2005). Nonetheless, especially from 2006 onwards, US and European policy makers appear to have adopted the language of 'radicalisation' and 'counter-radicalisation' at times in preference to, at others in addition to 'terrorism' and 'counter-terrorism'.

As it stands at the moment, studies of 'radicalisation' pose significant research

design and conceptualisation issues. Given that there is no single definition of radicalisation, and no single meaningful conception of the term, what should such policies actually look like? There is also no agreement as to where to begin to examine the causation of radicalisation. In part this reflects the complexity of the issue at hand, but it also reflects the paucity of meaningful and evidence based work on this subject – especially in the current research environment. Researchers are really only able to focus on a small number of selected case studies (hence open to a critique of 'selection bias'), and as a matter for study it suffers from a research design that may be indeterminate; where selection has been on the dependent rather than independent variable(s).

To start to address the role of research into radicalisation in the making of better, fairer and more effective treatment of violent radicalisation, this paper will be examining the very concept of 'radicalisation'[1] which lies at the heart of many current policy initiatives. The paper will attempt to show that current starting points in understanding radicalisation in this field betray many subjective and emotional orientations on issues of religion, especially Islam, and political mobilisation/violence, and that future research must make methodological rigour the basis for furthering empirical work in this field. The purpose here is to take a step back in order to gain a new perspective on the works on this subject to date, and to

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[1] While there are many forms of 'radicalisation', both in terms of typology (where distinctions can be made on bases such as violent vs. non-violent, foreign vs. domestic, group vs. individual, etc.) and case (Islamically inspired political violence, violence in the name of Animal rights, radical violent nationalism, etc.) this paper will only focus on a specific type in a specific case setting. The paper will mainly concentrate on radical violent takfiri jihadism (RVTJ). *Takfiri* refers to radicalised Muslims who feel that it is a religious and moral obligation to wage Jihad against *kafir* or non-believers. *Takfiri* often feel unconstrained by traditional *fiqh* or Islamic jurisprudence, as they see their goal of attacking apostasy and ensuring the emergence of a Muslim world as ends which can justify almost any means, whether this means violating any element of the *fiqh* including eating pork, drinking etc. While some scholars may feel the term radical violent *takfiri* jihadist over-elaborated, the point here is to suggest individuals who are radical, committed to violent political action, and who not only believe that jihad can be waged in Muslim lands of conflict/occupation, but that this fight can be taken and imposed on non-believers anywhere at any time.

assess why these other approaches have yet to qualitatively explain or positivistically predict how, when and why radicalisation occurs. This critical reassessment of radicalisation allows for new ways to engage with the issue of radicalisation.

Terrorism vs. Radicalisation: Conceptualisation and Differentiation

One departure point for understanding radicalisation could be terrorism studies. Conceptually terrorism is a 'loaded' term, contested and without consensus on its meaning or usage (Gibbs, 1989) Tilly (2004) defined terrorism the 'asymmetrical deployment of threats and violence against enemies using means that fall outside the forms of political struggle routinely operating within some current regime'. (Tilly, 2004: 5) Explanations which emphasise a decoding of the political act of terrorism over the causality of this action have not yet adequately explained how and why individuals come to decide how, when, and why terrorism should be deployed as a tactic. Accounts that prioritise psychology and individual rationales over 'contextually determined' causality appear to fail to explain the power of 'structure' to limit and prioritise the choice of terrorism as a political strategy. According to one recent study, there are forty-two 'Key Terrorism Researchers' in the field, who publish on a range of subjects, including political violence, historical aspects of terrorism, prevention of terrorism, responses to terrorism and terrorist incidents, amongst others. (Reid and Chen, 2007: 328-30) Efforts to create one grand theory of terrorism, to explain its occurrence and tactical use across all cases is not now prevalent, and the current state of the field reflects an emerging consensus that meta-narratives of 'terrorism' fail because terrorism is a 'strategy, not a creed'.

Despite, or potentially because of, the constant political attention and attempts to jumpstart academic contributions, the field of terrorism studies broadly remains split between those who seek to theorise and/or model the use of terrorism, and those

who seek to report on specific terrorist tactics and/or organisations. Schmid and Jongman, Horgan, and Silke are all broadly in agreement that there are too many scholars generalising out of not enough empirical data, and that ultimately the use of 'canned data' instead of the collection of new primary data means few scholars are in a position to make full contributions to fundamental issues such as conceptualisation of the issues to be studied (Horgan, 2005, Schmid and Jongman, 1988, Silke, 2004). Empirically, there is quite simply not enough open-source primary data to assess the effects of causes in a meaningful and nuanced fashion. When examining the broader field of terrorism studies, Schmid and Longman concluded that around 80% of current research and publication is based on open-source secondary source material, and lamented that the field is unique in so far as "so much is written on the basis of so little research" (Schmid and Jongman, 1988). Silke (2004) points out that while there are many benefits to using secondary source material, there are also key pitfalls – not least the reiteration and re-integration of the same research over and over (Silke, 2004: 62-3). In part, argue Horgan and Rapoport, this represents the 'seduction of violence' associated with studying terrorism, such that there was barely any literature in the field of terrorism studies in 1969, some 5000 items in the English language 17 years later, and countless articles, books, policy papers and uncommissioned research especially in the wake of 9/11. (Horgan, 2005, Rapoport, 1988, Thackrah, 1987)

The meaning of 'radicalisation' is relatively unexplored compared to the use of the term 'terrorism', which has not lacked academic attempts at conceptualisation and definition over a sustained period. (Schmid and Jongman, 1988, Stepanova, 2008) To date, the study of radicalisation, in terms of research design, case selection, and policy creation is potentially less thought through and critically challenged. If radicalisation is a matter for empirical study, then there needs to be some basics about

what scholars, practitioners and policy-makers mean when using this term. Related terms are not new – mainly radicalism, or radical politics, which have been used by historians of the early modern and modern periods as well as researched and theorised by a range of sociologists. Bittner's seminal article from 1964 defines radicalism and radical politics in relief with 'common sense' (Bittner, 1963). For Bittner, radicalism was about an all encompassing and uncompromisingly idealistic state of mind, which sought to replace all that was bad with all that was good. (Bittner, 1963: 929) This particular line of thought was taken up by those seeking to understand the effects of charisma on revolutionary movements, and those who sought to understand the attraction of radical belief systems amongst those who espoused revolutionary ideals. Radicalism, whether Islamic or idealistic/romantic, is a different idea than that of 'radicalization' – which can be intuited from prior history and its use in context to more broadly denote the process by which individuals are inculcated and implement Bittner's idea of an ideological and uncompromising (hence, inherently illiberal) worldview.

When applied to Islam and Muslims, the term radical is often being used interchangeably and opaquely with terms such as fundamentalist, Islamist, Jihadist and neo-Salafist or Wahabbist with little regard for what these terms actually mean, and instead indicate signals about political Islam that these members of the media and politicians wish to transmit. (Saeed, 2007, Turner, 2007)[2] In such cases, Islamic

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[2] This is not to tar all recent work on this subject with the same brush: see especially Merari, A. (2005) 'Social, organizational and psychological factors in suicide terrorism.' in T. Bjorgo (ed) *Root Causes of Terrorism: Myths, reality and ways forward* London: Routledge., Fuller, G. (2002) 'The Future of Political Islam', *Foreign Affairs,* **81(March-April)**., Hafez, M. and Wiktorowicz, Q. (2005) 'Violence as Contention in the Egyptian Islamic Movement.' in Q. Wiktorowicz (ed) *Islamic Activism: A social movement approach.* Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, pp. 61-88, Hafez, M. M. (2003a) 'The armed Islamic movement in Algeria: From the FIS to the GIA', *International Journal of Middle East Studies,* **35(1),** 175-78, Hafez, M. M. (2003d) *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Violence in the Islamic World,* London, Lynne Rienner., Kurzman, C. (ed) (1998) *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook,* Oxford, Oxford University Press.#, Wickham, C. R. (2004) 'The Path to Moderation: Strategy and Learning in the Formation of Egypt's Wasat Party', *Comparative Politics,* **36(2),** 205-28., Euben, R.

radicalism can mean "those people who believe that Islam is under threat and that they are sanctioned to defend Islam from that threat" (Lim, 2005), and often 'Islamic radical fundamentalism' is used interchangeably with 'fundamentalist radical Islamism'. Fundamentalism is a term which is generally being used to denote religious practice based on literal interpretation of a sacred text, and in discussions of popular religion, is a term applied to Muslims and Christians (Lewis, 1993)[3]. In other cases, radical Islamist is a euphemism for violent Islamist (Langohr, 2004).

In the academic literature, the terms radical, radicalise and radicalisation have been used in a variety of ways. It has been used to indicate forms of populism related to revolutionary opportunity (Ellner, 2005), a revolutionary act in response to declining power (and used interchangeably with 'fundamentalism') (Ferrero, 2005), an 'ultra' form, or intensification of existing political orientations and behaviours often typified by a shift from peaceful activity to (ever more) violent 'extremism' (Jenne, 2004, Jenne et al., 2007, van den Broek, 2004, Brighton, 2007) the process by which political moderates become militant or increasingly support extremists and their positions, as well as a related sense of reaction to catalyst occasionally described as recruitment (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2003, de Figueiredo and Weingast, 2001, DeNardo, 1985, Ryan, 2007, Mesquita and Dickson, 2007, Rosendorff and Sandler, 2004, Duffield, 2002, Fraihi, 2008), and finally an individual sense of becoming hyper-aware of critical issues, resulting in a 'radical irrationality' and a subsequent willingness to violently act on this awareness (Gustafson, 2007, Simon, 1985).

(1995) 'When Worldviews Collide: Conflicting Assumptions about Human Behaviour Held by Rational Actor Theory and Islamic Fundamentalism', *Political Psychology,* **16(1),** 157-78.. These authors, amongst others, are often meticulous in defining and using terms to denote specific forms of Islamically inspired politics, and their careful and articulate use of terms allows for the reader to gain complete sense of their analysis and description of the phenomena they are examining.

[3] One way of understanding the relationship between fundamentalism and radicalisation is legitimacy. Fundamentalist reliance on sacred texts as being pure, unadulterated and inherently 'true' provide a moral basis for further political action. See Project, P. G. A. (2006) Muslims in Europe:

For EU policy makers, radicalisation often denotes violence and terrorism, a move from a peaceful perspective to one which encourages and thrives on the use of violence. 'Violent radicalisation' is currently a term only being used to describe terrorism being carried out by Muslims, and the 2005 EU *Strategy for Combating Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism* is intended to "prevent, protect, pursue and respond" to terrorist threats posed by "violent radicalisation" (Secretariat, 2007). The 'Prevent' strand of the EU strategy, and the *Ad Hoc Briefing Paper on Preventing Violent Radicalisation and Terrorist Recruitment in the EU* (2005) heavily refer to Al Qaeda related activities, and the 'radical era' of Islamism. For the European Commission, radicalisation constitutes 'the phenomenon of the people embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to terrorism'.[4] This definition of radicalisation certainly denotes a clearer understanding of this concept than that used by the UK's Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG). The DCLG's 2007 document on *The Role of Muslim Identity Politics in Radicalisation (A Study in Progress)* never actually defines radicalisation.[5] It does, however, suggest an implicit relationship between Islam and terrorism, which hinges on vulnerability. In this model, readers are left to guess that those suffering from identity crises, are vulnerable to radicalisation when a youthful affinity for terrorism meets a search for identity during moments of 'personal crisis'.

Religion and Causality: Ideological, Psychological or Tautological?

In many recent cases, the term radicalisation has come to increasingly denote the unstated but implicit correlation between the 'dangers of radical Islam' and

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Economic Worries Top Concerns About Religious and Cultural Identity. Washington, DC: Pew Research Centre.

[4]Available   at http://ec.europa.eu/justice_home/funding/2004_2007/radicalisation/doc/call_2007_en.pdf

violence (Kirby, 2007, Kepel, 2005b). While there are scholars who question this pejorative use of radicalisation, by arguing that radicalisation has come to mean 'participation in new, radical, and progressive coalitions between Muslims and non-Muslims' this pejorative connotation is very much in the ascendance in academia, the media, and amongst policy makers. (Yaqoob, 2007: 279) In this context, being radical, or becoming radicalised indicates a pejorative connotation, and even amongst academics, radical is coming to have a specific sectarian meaning. At a recent conference which the author attended, a speaker referred to 'radical terrorism', a term distinct from terrorism itself, yet its meaning was left undefined. However, it was left to the audience to gather that 'radical terrorism' meant RVTJ – Muslims carrying out political violence in any geographical location, rather than terrorism in the name of ethno-nationalism, non-Islamic religion, or the state (amongst a variety of other potential actors/perpetrators).

Where radical is being used to specifically denote RVTJ specifically, terms like 'radical activities' are also being used to mean terrorist activities, and indicate not just the perpetration of actual terrorist attacks, but the logistics and training behind them (Cesari, 2008). In this way 'Muslim radicals' (here often meaning politicised Muslims) are inherently understood by many Western politicians and media to be 'anti-Western' – an inherent danger to Western cultural and political values, and distinct from (and a malign influence on) psychologically weak/ideologically feeble 'vulnerable' Muslims in the UK and beyond (Kirby, 2007, Lewis, 2007). Clinical psychologists suggest that support for Islamic political radicalism (and by extension, participation in radical violent *takfiri* jihadism) results from inherent psychological traits of Islam, described as splitting and rage at bad objects and the identification of

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[5] Available at http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/452628.pdf

God with the superego, as well as the identify diffusion between youth and age. (Hudson, 2005: 60) Other psychologists suggest, however, that it is not possible to diagnose terrorists as psychopathic or mentally sick, that instead they are 'quite sane' but 'deluded' by religion and ideology. (Gurr, 1970)

Other scholars assert that political violence, 'inspired' by specific forms of Islamic ideology is causally associated with a belief that Western liberalism is fundamentally evil, and that the first step in (re)achieving heaven on earth is the destruction of such values. (Stern, 2003) For Stern, this is a function of 'spiritual intoxication', a search for simple answers in a complex world, and a belief that violence can 'cleanse' the world of 'impurities'(Stern, 2003: 281, Fox, 2004). Some scholars suggest that the non-integration of European Muslims, and their discomfort with Western values have left them as vulnerable 'prey for violent dogmas'. (Phillips et al., 2007: 218, Silber and Bhatt, 2007: 8, Sageman, 2004, Shore, 2006, Jackson, 2005: 54-55) The notion that Islamists specifically, and Muslims more broadly 'don't get Western liberal freedoms and lifestyles' is part of UK and US popular political discourse, and the British Government sees this as a function of alienation and marginalisation rather than a structural issue. (Shore, 2006: 165) For Gerges there is an all pervasive sense amongst Muslims in Europe and beyond that the West is enjoined on a 'crusade' to oppress the Muslim world, its culture and beliefs – crusades apparent in Danish cartoons, US support for Israel, and the invasion of Iraq. (Gerges, 2007) In such cases, religion aids in explaining occurrences of mobilisation and perceptions that the protection of identity has become a moral obligation. (Gerges, 2007: 286-9, Yaqoob, 2007: 279) Authors such as Abbas (2005, 2007) and Rehman (2007) pursue another line of causality in the form of psycho-structural causation, whereby individual interactions with social structures (i.e. immigrant

experiences in dealings with the State) are seen as causing alienation. This alienation stems from exchanges between immigrant communities and xenophobic and broadly unsupportive 'host-nation' societies, and creates and further exacerbates inter-generational tensions within these communities. (2007) Single variable explanations which suggest that identity induced economic and/or social 'deprivation' or non-integration of Muslims into Western societies causes radical violent takfiri jihadism (RVTJ) [6] can be increasingly challenged, as there is an emerging consensus that low income may be causally related to other forms of political violence, such as civil war or coups d'états, but that inequality or lack of education are not causally associated with terrorism. (Shore, 2006) In fact, there is some suggestion that terrorist violence is actually overall associated with higher paying jobs and higher education, and Von Kippel, Pape, and Sageman have all established that those most likely to participate as foreign fighters in Afghanistan and/or Iraq are middle class and well educated. (Krueger and Malečková, 2003, Sageman, 2004, Pape, 2005, von Hippel, 2002: 26)

Debunking Islamically Focused Approaches to Understanding Radicalisation

In any discussion of 'Islamic Political Radicalism', determining what 'radical' refers to is hugely complex, difficult, and often confusing. For example, how does being a 'radical' Islamist relate to the use of violence, or pluralistic democratic tolerance? Does being 'radicalised' mean the same as leaving a secular or agnostic orientation to becoming a more committed religious practitioner? Does it mean a transformation from being highly religious but politically inactive or apathetic to becoming religiously active and politically active? Or might it mean 'participation in new, radical, and progressive coalitions between Muslims and non-Muslims' to facilitate political change? (Yaqoob, 2007)

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[6] Please see note 1 for description of RVTJ.

In the post-9/11 context, Muslim minorities have been viewed as constituting a 'problem group' and a disloyal 'fifth column'. Government and media have lurched between overplaying and underplaying the real nature of terrorist threats, and Muslims perceive themselves as being the targets of counter-terrorism legislation and activities in many countries (Alexander, 2000, Bakir, 2005, Poynting, 2006, Kepel, 2005a, Croft, 2007). One of the most significant problems to date in the study of radicalisation has been that analyses of relationships between Islamic belief and/or practice with political violence has 'othered' Muslim experiences through debates over, and the unquestioned use of terms such as 'jihad',' Ummah', 'Caliphate' 'the Islamic world', 'the West', 'the Islamic revival', 'political Islam', 'Islamism', 'extremism', 'radicalism', 'fundamentalism', 'religious terrorism', 'jihadists' etc. (Bonnefoy, 2003, Jackson, 2005, Llorente, 2002, Volpi, 2007, Croft, 2007) Yet such methodologically weak and ideologically assessments persist despite the fact that a causal relationship between religion and politically inspired violence is very difficult to prove, and that there is overwhelming evidence that Islamic faith, belief and practice does not lead to RVTJ. While the role of religion in forms of violent radicalisation and violent political mobilisation is an important area of study, it should be remembered that religion cannot be understood as *the* cause of conflict, let alone *the* cause of terrorism and radicalisation. To this extent, any research that claims to establish such a link lends itself to accusations of subjective ideological bias. This is especially true of quantitative studies (especially polls) that seek to establish causality between Islamic faith, belief, and/or practice and violent behaviour, or studies that seek to establish the effects of religion as a cause, rather than the cause of religion as one of many effects.

The simple reality is that the counter-factual dominates here; on first glance,

the empirical data could actually be read as indicating that religion may play a more significant role in preventing violence than causing it. The vast majority of Muslims in the West reject extremism, are not radicalised, and reject radical violent *takfiri* Jihadism on the grounds that it is immoral and unproductive no matter what their political perspective, and this becomes apparent when polls show that a majority of Muslims in Britain feel that unemployment is much more vital issue than a concern that they are enduring a new Crusade [7]. Indeed as Olivier Roy has pointed out, alongside a resurgence of violent radicalisation has come a revival of spiritualised Islam, as well as post Islamist movements that focus more on civil society than on politics (Roy, 2006, Roy, 2005). Often religiosity leads individuals and societies to strive to reject violence, and religious elites, practices and institutions which not only prevent 'radicalisation', but actively discourage violent behaviour through the implementation of occasionally severe forms of moral, ethical and social sanction far outweigh those who perceive religion as a basis for violence (Taarnby, 2007: 175, Roy, 2005, Roy, 2006). Yet these same forms of sanction may be brought to bear to ostracise those that don't implicitly support the tactics of political violence. This makes religion a potential cite of contestation, wherein political factions try to hijack religious faith, belief and/or practice in order to bring about desired political objectives (Githens-Mazer, 2009) From a bottom-up perspective, religion can provide individual moral and ethical bases for understanding how and why participating in religious inspired political violence is obligatory and rational, or forbidden (Hafez, 2003b, Hafez, 2003c, Hafez, 2003d, Wiktorowicz, 2001, Wiktorowicz, 2004, Wiktorowicz, 2005a, Wiktorowicz, 2005b, Toft, 2007). In European Muslim communities, religion can be both a differentiating and binding phenomena, at once a

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[7]See especially recent Gallup Polls here: http://www.gallup.com/consulting/worldpoll/26410/gallup-

basis for discrimination and distinction, and in recent times has become an important basis for political action and mobilisation in 'community politics' (Roy, 2006). Despite any intuitive, non-empirically examined assurances of correlation between Islamic faith, belief and practice and political violence, the causal relationship between identity, religious faith, belief and practice, and the use of violence remains opaque at best, and defining the exact role of religion in radicalisation is complex and problematic.

If we cannot say 'religion causes radicalisation', then what can we say about the relationship between religion and radicalisation? At best, we can say that religion can shape the symbolic content and meaning of a movement, and that religion may bring an individual to believe that a movement is not only just, but also morally and ethically obligatory (Fox, 2001, Fox, 2004, Keddie, 1998, Mukhopadhyay, 2007, Yates, 2007: 141, McCants, 2006). An analysis of the causal relationship between religion and political mobilisation, let alone between religion and radicalisation or violent radicalisation, hinges on whether we take religion to mean a personal belief system, everyday practice, institutions and elites, or a broader cultural context (a paradigm in the Kuhnian sense) which helps structure interpretations of reality, morality, ethics etc. (Wiebe, 1981, Kuhn, 1996) Religion, can therefore be hypothesised as an insufficient and unnecessary cause of radicalisation, and we must be especially careful when associating violent radicalisation with Islamic 'culture', social structures and practices (Modood, 2005, Kirby, 2007). Individuals may argue that an obligation to participate in direct action is morally sanctioned and ordained by faith, belief and/or practice. This perception can be directly inspired by religious elites seeking to recruit and groom individuals to participate in political violence. This does

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not equate, however, to the proposition that religion is *the* cause of RVTJ.

If we are to fully understand this phenomenon, we need to move away from theological interpretations. While issues of Islamic theology, or *fiqh* (i.e. jurisprudence) may help to understand the framing of ideas, theology will not explain the causes of RVTJ. Theology in this instance serves to give basic context to individual propensities to participate in violent radical action, where they are framed through religiously inspired interpretations and justifications for action (Githens-Mazer, 2008b, Githens-Mazer, 2008a, Sageman, 2004, Sageman, 2007, Neumann and Rogers, 2007). It cannot provide a way of understanding causality. However, establishing a clear causal relationship between psychology, social structures, interactions and exchanges is extremely difficult given the overwhelming weight of counter-factual evidence.

Radicalisation: Working Definition and Understanding Causality

One way to reorient the study of radicalisation away from subjective discussions of religion and violence, is to properly conceptualise this term. Historically, it has been used to describe English radicalism in the 16th and 17th centuries, meaning those that rejected ritualised religious practice of Catholicism, in which rituals were led by religious elites, and where elites (priests) defined the individual's relationship with God and dictated political agendas and behaviour, in favour of an individually experienced and textually defined form of worship, where elites weren't absent, but where the role of elites was defined in a more bottom-up fashion. For English radicals, the rejection of Catholicism in favour of wide variety of Protestant religious practices (ranging from Lutheran to Episcopalian, to the Levellers and Quakers), ended the clergy mediated relationship between God and man, and man and the Bible. This rejection of mediation led to religious practice which was

understood as bringing the individual directly closer to God and religious practice as it was stipulated in the Bible. In politics, this translates into a shift from rhetoric to practice, the movement from talking about issues, establishing manifestos and position, to implementation. It should be noted that in both cases, elites matter, but in very different ways. In a non-radical ritual laden situation, elites create and define political mandates, and political behaviour is determined by mediation of God's 'will' on earth as told to these elites. In a radical situation, textual authority is undiluted and un-mediated – a relationship between that individual, and the way that they understand the text. An individual may learn of this state through elite 'enablement' or introduction, but wherein once the 'radical ideal' is implanted, elites have little capacity to control subsequent political behaviour.[8] This point of crossover, where ritual is rejected in favour of practice, where rhetoric becomes secondary to action is the point of radicalisation – the point where Catholic Mass becomes an abomination before God, the point where strapping on a rucksack full of explosive and preparing to blow oneself and others up on the London Underground system makes rational sense, not only tactically, but also ideologically. This, however, is an ideal type; there are a range of behaviours that an individual may hold to represent true practice. It follows, therefore, that there are a variety of ways of interpreting contemporary radical movements and few actually constitute this ideal type.

After careful consideration of the historical literature, and recent cases of what is being termed as radicalisation in the UK, one potentially useful working definition of radicalisation is: a collectively defined, individually felt moral obligation to participate in direct action (Githens-Mazer, 2009)#. This definition particularly takes

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[8] It should be very much noted that these ideas on the role of elites very much represent ideal types. In practice, many radical and non-radical movements have much more complex relationships with the role of elites, and in all cases political behaviour is simultaneously bounded by not only how elites and/or individuals defined reasonable political agendas and direct action, but what is accessible

account of equifinality and multifinality: where a variety of different causes may lead to the same outcome, and where the exact same causes may lead to a range of different outcomes, in so far as it does not tautologically define cause in outcome, nor does it limit outcome in terms of cause. Radicalisation does not occur in a vacuum – it is a course of action which is impacted on by all many factors which help to determine its shape and form: historical circumstances, the potency of some myths, memories and symbols which underpin identities over others, economic conditions, political frustration, amongst many other insufficient but necessary and insufficient and unnecessary causal factors. Such necessary and unnecessary factors help to set the scene where, when and how radicalisation can occur, and helps to shape the variety of radicalisation itself.

This definition is based on empirical data collection in the UK, as well careful consideration of the historical use of the term. Perhaps most significantly, it reflects how British Muslim communities themselves perceive and understand the term. While this definition is quite specific, it's not too far from several other recent contributions, such as that of McCauley and Molashenko, who define radicalisation in a manner closer to Bittner, as an increasing ideological commitment to intergroup conflict and violence (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008). The key difference here is in the role of violence – and the working definition here reflects the fact that British Muslim communities often see aspects of radicalisation as being positive – for example where an individual is 'radicalised' into participating in a "Stop the War" march in 2003, or where someone feels compelled to become politically active over the treatment of the Palestinians. However, members of Muslim communities often understand radicalisation to be unhealthy and counter-productive once this sense of

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and reasonable within a whole host of other cultural, structural and ideological factors.

obligation leads them down a path of violence – and see this path as being deviant and non-Islamic, and hence label such individuals as *takfiri* – literally to denunciate someone as a non-believer. From this perspective, radicalisation is about an adherence to a collectively defined but individually held set of moral values, which cannot be individually compromised, and which found individual political orientation. Yet, amongst such individuals, this need to be individually morally bound may translate into an acceptance of a 'real politique' – that to accomplish an ideal end requires practical means – such as interaction, exchange and compromise. In such cases, these individuals are clearly committed to a radical agenda, yet do not believe this agenda should be implemented through violence. To this extent, violence, just like the presence/absence of religion shouldn't be a uniquely defining factor of radicalisation as a concept, but instead should be understood as a key definition of specific forms of radicalisation. Equally, strong research on radicalisation should be extremely clear as to what kind of radicalisation it seeks to study.

There are also clearly varying degrees of process, belief and commitment in terms of radicalisation, and the condition of being radicalised is dynamic, such that it can be present one minute and absent the next with no guarantee of its return. It is also important to recognise that non-radical does not equate to non-political or a-political. Rather radicalisation as a concept denotes distinct ways of understanding the foundations of political legitimacy and political mobilisation. Placing radicalisation along a continuum helps to illustrate this point – where variation in 'degrees' of commitment to the radical ideal can be charted. Goertz makes the crucial point, that in their enthusiasm for reifying complex sociological or political concepts, theorists and empiricists often focus too much on what a concept *is*, rather than identifying such a concept on a continuum, in order to assess when a concept is present versus when it is

not. (Goertz, 2006, Goertz and Mahoney, 2005)

Radicalisation
Conceptual Poles

- Apathetic ———————————————————————————Radicalised +

- Commitment to Rhetoric

- Mediated relationship with Political orientation, mobilisation and action

- Mediated relationship with rhetoric and texts

- Elite defined political participation and behaviour

- Power relationships maintained through practice of ritual

- Commitment Direct Action

- Mobilisation and Participation are individually obligatory and defined

- Relationship with agendas are personal, and non-elite defined

- Direct Action prized as defined by texts

- Rejection of ritual in favour of direct action

Dichotomising a concept is problematic, so why do it here? Both Goertz and Charles Ragin make the point that concepts such as democracy become overly fluid and relative when used in theories such as "Democratic Peace Theory", or other situations requiring conceptualisation of democracy. (Goertz, 2004, Goertz and Mahoney, 2005, Mahoney and Goertz, 2006, Ragin, 2006, Ragin, 2000, Ragin, 2008, Ragin and Pennings, 2005) In such situations, democracy often becomes a relative concept rather than an observable phenomenon, such that many different forms of political representation may become defined as democracy, rather than specifying exact conditions such as directly elected representatives, or indeed recognising that some institutional organisation of representatives may be inherently more democratic than others.[9] In the case of radicalisation, it is as important to define what is not

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[9] For further discussion on the application of concepts and 'drift', see Collier, D. and Mahon, J. E., Jr. (1993) 'Conceptual "Stretching" Revisited: Adapting Categories in Comparative Analysis', *The American Political Science Review,* **87(4),** 845-55, Gerring, J. (1997) 'Ideology: A Definitional Analysis', *Political Research Quarterly,* **50(4),** 957-94, Gerring, J. (1999) 'What Makes a Concept Good? A Criterial Framework for Understanding Concept Formation in the Social Sciences', *Polity,* **31(3),** 357-93, Gerring, J. (2001) *Social Science Methodology: A Criterial Framework,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, Goertz, G. (2006) *Social science concepts : a user's guide,* Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, Goertz, G. and Mahoney, J. (2005) 'Two-Level Theories and Fuzzy-Set Analysis', *Sociological Methods Research,* **33(4),** 497-538, Gray, J. N. (1977) 'On the Contestability of Social and Political Concepts', *Political Theory,* **5(3),** 331-48, Sartori, G. (1970) 'Concept

radical as what is, so that we can make empirical observations of both conditions. Methodologically this allows us to derive observations of the causal conditions which explain why the one situation exists rather than the other. If on the positive pole, radicalisation is being defined as replacement of rhetoric with practice derived from 'the text', what constitutes the negative pole? What is the counterfactual to radicalisation? Logically it must be those cases where rhetoric and ritual are more important than direct political action – a state where ritualised practice mediates, directs and legitimises political behaviour is prised, and motivates action.

In fact, there are a many different examples of radical movements and of radicalisation. Differentiation is not only a function of factors such as political, cultural and religious context, history and geography, but also differs within specific conditions. For example, the early incarnation of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a prominent organisation in the American Civil Rights movement, exemplifies a group that had moved beyond a rhetorical commitment to racial equality in the United States, and played a key role in several campaigns of non-violent direct action. In this way, their spearheading of the Freedom Rides, the March on Washington (1963), and Freedom Summer all constitute radicalised political behaviour. SNCC's form of radicalisation can be assessed relative to white Northern Democrats, who may have implicitly supported de-segregation and aspects of racial equality without participating in direct action, yet could be mobilised by party machines and local politicians to support – or at least not oppose – the candidacy of politicians like John F. Kennedy, and support Lyndon Baines Johnson's passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts (1965). On the other hand, SNCC itself can be observed on a continuum and compared to parallel institutions of the

Misformation in Comparative Politics', *The American Political Science Review,* **64(4),** 1033-53.

period, such as the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP), Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and even groups such as the Weathermen (Weather Underground Organisation) and Black Panther Party for Self-Defence. These organisations, although all representing a degree of radicalisation in the United States during the 1960's cannot, in anyway, be lumped together as all being committed to exactly the same political agendas, or indeed of using the same techniques to achieve these agendas. On the other hand, their commitment to direct action is explicit, and their belief that this action forms part of an individually defined commitment to proper and moral political conduct is more than apparent. These groups define this sense of legitimacy in a variety of ways – and the roles of elites varies significantly between them, but they were all comprised of individuals who felt a collectively defined but individually held moral obligation to take direct action, and the legitimacy of this obligation often came from interpretations of key 'sacred' texts – ranging from the New Testament to Marx's *Capital*.

Radicalisation is a process wherein an individual's 'fuse is lit' by an enabler, and/or through an encounter with institutions and/or key texts. Once it is lit, the radicalised individual sincerely holds that there is little room for nuance in practice. It could be hypothesised that radicalisation becomes violent when the achievement of this utopia is not understood as being possible through political exchange and give and take, but replaced by a nihilism which creates a millenarian urge to tear down current human behaviours and institutions so as to provide a blank canvas to enact the ideals of an ideal and/or a sacred text. When violently radicalised, specifically in the case of RVTJ, consensus and political/spiritual compromise is rejected in favour of

the full, undiluted, and violent implementation of an ideal of practice, and this ideal becomes the most important (and potentially only) element of political mobilisation and behaviour. For RVTJ, any suggestion otherwise is *takfiri*, the practice of non-believers and those trying to stymie the true practice and implementation of the RVTJ ideal. This is manifested by unwavering commitment to the implementation of specific interpretation of *Shariah*, and RVTJ is founded on a belief that a religious-political utopia can be constructed on earth only if/when correct unadulterated and non-deviant practice is observed.

Outside this specific subset of the phenomenon of radicalisation, it is extremely important to note there is no inherent causal relationship or necessary correlation between radicalisation and violence, and any assumptions of correlation between radicalisation and violence can be easily refuted by empirical evidence (Spalek, 2007)#. It is possible, for example, to understand Ghandi's agenda as being about ideological application and implementation of a specific unbending agenda, yet direct action in this case was defined in large part by its commitment to non-violence. To this extent this working definition does not mention of specifics of identity or other causal factors, nor does it limit what forms of outcome need be observed. Such factors need to be observed empirically, rather than tautologically derived from the concept. Moral obligations mediated through the collective, i.e. mob violence, or violence in the name of non-religiously defined identities may be equally or greater prone to violence or extremism, and it is, at the very least, a matter for further rigorous empirical study as to which situations best lend themselves to higher degrees of violence, and those where individuals themselves have to determine what course of direct action is necessary.

Conclusions

This paper has highlighted the problems associated with the study of radicalisation: conceptually, methodologically, and politically. It has demonstrated how radicalisation has emerged as a politically popular concept, yet one which is intellectually and ideologically problematic – not least in its pejorative use to describe Muslim political activism in the West. In part, this problem indicates the subjective bias often present in the study of Islamically inspired political violence and RVTJ itself. It also indicated the inherent complexity of the phenomenon: radicalisation, and specifically RVTJ is subject to high degrees of equifinality and multifinality – a combination which only further hints at the failure to date of research design to identify the matter for study or the method by which it is to be studied.

Where authors, scholars, and politicians seek to understand RVTJ through theology, they betray their orientation to this problem as one of being Islam vs. the non-Muslim world. This has a serious knock-on effect. Where Muslim communities in Britain and the US feel as though they are being targeted by counter-radicalisation programmes, they may feel under greater scrutiny, and as though their identity, faith, belief and practice is being inherently challenged and rejected by non-Muslim institutions and society at large – especially where such programmes highlight religious training and teaching at the cost of addressing other kinds of social, political and economic issues amongst these communities. The shift away from terrorism to 'radicalisation' has stigmatised Muslim youth who may indeed be 'radical' in their desire for the implementation of Islamic ideals in contemporary politics, but who have positive non-violent contributions to make to their local communities and society more generally. To this extent, practitioners and politicians need to awaken to the fact that many operational definitions of radicalisation are leading to bad policy interventions, and that the causal complexity of this phenomena means that there are

no simple or easily measured solutions to targeting causes of RVTJ. As frustrating as it is for practitioners and politicians, the verbose, seemingly overly-complicated and all too often academically oriented study of radicalisation needs to be further explicitly supported, included and embraced to claim that counter-radicalisation policies are evidence-based.

Studies of radicalisation may be complex and methodologically challenging, but do not suffer any more or any less from methodological dilemmas than parallel studies of collective political behaviours such as mobilisation and recruitment – not least in questions of where agency lies in such behaviours. An empirical basis for an ontological understanding of radicalisation is ultimately possible because it is an observable concept – especially where scholars and practitioners begin to observe the presence and absence of the phenomenon, and where they are able to place this phenomenon along a continuum to observe its relative presence/absence. While there is some scholarship which is producing methodologically sound work, such studies have yet to come to full fruition in the field, and to truly understand radicalisation, violent radicalisation, and RVTJ will take an even greater investment of time, effort and resources. One way to address this dilemma is to examine the process of research into radicalisation itself, and to subsequently extrapolate which factors are being subjectively causally associated with the practice of radical violent *takfiri* jihadism versus those that are empirically observable.

Methodologically speaking, the most accurate way to study the role of Islam in (violent) political mobilisation in the West would be to study the overwhelming majority of cases – where Muslims are either peacefully political involved, or like much of the non-Muslim population, not particularly involved in politics. To truly understand contemporary Muslim experience, it is perhaps necessary to initially

design a research project which examines why Muslims living in Britain and the US have remained so committed to democratic peaceful political behaviour, despite increased stigmatisation, attacks by politicians and the media, increasing levels of physical threats and abuse by the far right, and anxieties about the role of the West in the wider Muslim world. A truly objective research design would then use this data to understand the very small number of outlier cases – those in the hundreds (as opposed to the millions) where individuals felt that their experience, faith and identity justified the use of violence. This is not to say that security services do not have a legitimate interest in understanding and preventing RVTJ attacks – and that they therefore may feel pressure to understand this phenomenon by concentrating on the outlier cases. However, their task will remain virtually impossible until we understand these cases as the abnormalities which 'prove the rule', and any academic study or research project which ultimately fails to recognise this significant and fundamental methodological flaw should be treated as entirely subjective and ideologically driven.

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