The Kenya attacks: A commentary from ‘British Muslims for Secular Democracy’

Tehmina Kazi¹

A nine-year-old boy has just been shot in the hip. As he struggles on the floor of a Kenyan shopping centre, languishing in rivulets of blood, his mother and 15-year-old sister are asked to recite verses of the Qu’ran. Being Muslim, they manage to do this successfully. To the horror of bystanders, the two most important females in this boy’s life are shot dead anyway. The young boy summons up just enough strength to wail out, “Why?” One of the shooters responds: “Because they were not wearing the hijab.”

As citizens of the world – heads spinning with grief – try to make sense of the ideology behind this attack, and the mindset that led to the equally horrific murder of innocent Christians in Pakistan, hard questions must be asked. Not clichéd, overly simplistic ones, such as “Are Muslims doing enough to combat extremism?” My questions are more searching than that, and require greater introspection than the 20 minutes of shallow TV debate that the former question tends to elicit. Firstly, it is clear to me that the supremacist ideology peddled by these international terrorists is the thin end of a spectacularly ugly wedge. I see less serious manifestations of this ideology all the time as the Director of British Muslims for Secular Democracy. For instance, I am so tired of people asking me how I can be a practising Muslim and simultaneously support secular democracy, that I have prepared a “one-size-fits-all” answer. I see pro-niqab zealots get emotional about a woman’s right to choose what she wears – which is no bad thing in and of itself, as my organisation has consistently opposed a total ban – but where is the same all-encompassing passion when it comes to defending women who are threatened with stoning for choosing NOT to cover their hair or face? I have heard people say that supporting a safe space for LGBT Muslims to pray (which I do, as a new Committee Member of the Inclusive Mosque Initiative) takes one out of the fold of Islam. For that matter, I have witnessed people

¹ Director, British Muslims for Secular Democracy, www.bmsd.org.uk
making declarations of *takfir* – declaring other Muslims to be outside the fold of Islam – as casually as a five-year-old eats boiled sweets. It is worth noting that this is something that even mainstream religious scholars don’t do, except in particularly egregious cases.

Incidents like these have occurred too frequently for me to brush them off as some kind of anomaly. Yet many Muslim organisations in the UK are happy to plaster over the symptoms of this illness e.g. condemning specific terrorist attacks, while ignoring the broader ideology that feeds them, and is sustained by them. This is probably due to a misguided belief that the status quo is working (if it was, then why are we even having these discussions?) or a simple lack of courage.

The most galling part, for me, is the fact that activists and commentators who DO have the courage to take on supremacist ideologies – such as my associates at Muslims for Progressive Values USA and the Canadian Muslim convert Dr David Liepert – are the recipients of real vitriol within Muslim communities. At the very least, there is an undercurrent of hostility that “liberals, progressives and secularists” are trying to do something different and innovative. The oft-quoted Hadith, “Innovations lead to the Hellfire!” is often thrown at us without any understanding of the historical context that the Prophet (pbuh) was operating in. These harsh attitudes also fail to appreciate the premium we place on universal human rights and social justice, which easily outranks individual interpretations of religion. As a dear Muslim friend so succinctly put it: “To do good is my religion.”

There is a strong argument that the peddlers of supremacist ideologies are, in fact, innovators themselves. As Dr Liepert writes in his article on “Islam vs Islamism:” “At Hudabiyyah when Muhammad first returned to Mecca, he could have conquered it then and there. Instead, he accepted the terms the Meccans offered and humbly left, because he knew God had a plan. And for the rest of his life he promised to protect the rights and freedoms of non-Muslims too, and declared that Muslims who followed after him should do the same. He created a place where Islam was allowed -- not imposed -- and he allowed and
protected other faiths besides: Christianity for Christians and Judaism for Jews. He politely discussed religion with anyone, even those who disagreed with him, and he followed a faith that honored the faithful observances of others. In fact, Medina's Constitution even made provisions for the inclusion of polytheists and unbelievers!"

This brings me to my first question: Where is the same condemnation for peddlers of hateful ideologies, BEFORE an attack occurs? I was pleasantly surprised to find an answer in one minute on YouTube. Apparently, an international conference of Islamic scholars – including Al-Azhar top brass – took place in Beirut in July 2013, representing a serious attempt to cancel out the takfiri ideology once and for all. An excellent initiative, no doubt, but why did we not hear about this in the UK? It takes brave imams and grassroots workers, like my friend Manwar Ali (AKA Shaykh Abu Muntasir of Ipwich-based charity JIMAS) to disseminate this message.

My second and third questions are more practical. How do we challenge the narrative of certain groupings in the UK, which tap into the identity “fault lines” of some young Muslims? I’m talking about specific organisations which inflame international grievances (rather than seeking to heal them), and those who whip up anger against some, usually nebulous, other (instead of following the Prophet’s example of being just and kind in one’s dealings with people, even political adversaries). Contrary to popular belief, these groups do not always have a religious taint; some simply exploit the identity politics of being a second- or third-generation Muslim in a non-Muslim majority country.

From my own experience, it is helpful to stride forward with at least some level of credibility in the communities you serve. One should strike a balance between being liked and respected, and having the gumption to publically expose problems within Muslim communities. Further, any organisation that hopes to effectively challenge extremism must simultaneously tackle GENUINE cases of anti-Muslim sentiment. For instance, BMSD have put together protests and satirical YouTube videos against the now-banned group Al-Muhajiroun, and I am an Advisory Board member of the Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks Project.
In addition, equality and human rights must be mainstreamed within Muslim communities. There should be an understanding that if one is constantly complaining about Islamophobia, it is crucial to stand up for the rights of other minorities too. The Nothing Holy about Hatred campaign – which BMSD supported – gathered public statements against homophobia, from leaders of faith-based organisations. Other projects have been set up in this vein: Faith Matters will launch a “Connecting Communities” project on 9th October 2013 to facilitate an exchange of information between civil society leaders from the Pakistani diaspora, and those in Pakistan. The ultimate aim is to advance equality. I have also recently been asked to join the Advisory Board of a new project which challenges hate speech committed by public figures.

My third question remains: once the destructive groups are effectively challenged, how do we sustain that counter-narrative? I think it is crucial to develop a Muslim identity which promotes strong interfaith and intrafaith relations, is utterly comfortable with difference, and steers well away from trying to control others. We are still a long way from consolidating this, but little steps are being taken all the time. Just last month, my local mosque hosted a discussion on Shia-Sunni unity with high-profile speakers. I am also on the steering group of an initiative called “People Like Us – Interfaith” a project that brings people from different religious and non-religious backgrounds together in pursuit of shared social justice goals. We held our inaugural event at Cambridge University on 21st April 2013, and it was a great success.

Ultimately, what I would like to see is stronger co-operation between these different initiatives – not just because they combat toxic ideologies, but because of the intrinsic value of promoting social cohesion. I hope I have set an example to people about the importance of speaking out against injustice, and that more will do so organically. After all, the Qu’ran instructs us to do this, even if it means speaking out against ourselves.