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Essay

The term 'radicalisation' (radikalisering) in the Swedish public debate as seen by an elderly retired professor of Islamology

In the flow of news and comments in the media today, we frequently see the term *radikalisering* (radicalisation) used in connection with Muslim groups and individuals. It is applied to those who express, through words or deeds, interpretations of Islam which are regarded as extreme and are thus incompatible with 'the values of Swedish society' (i.e. democracy, secularism, gender equality). The term is used especially when there are suspicions of recruitment activities to jihadist groups which argue for the legitimacy of coercion and violence in an endeavour to establish what they regard an Islamic society or community. The term thus has a clear pejorative meaning.

The reason for my being invited to participate in this discussion about the definition and use of the term has to do with my age: I have been a student and researcher of Islamology since the early 1960s. I can thus reflect on changes of views and usage of terms in scholarly perspectives and in the political discourse during these six decades.

In my copy of a Swedish book of synonyms (*Ord för ord*, printed in 1964), the word *radikal* (radical) is given the following equivalents:

Vänsterman (leftist), *reformivrare* (activist for reform),
ytterlighetsman (extremist), *genomgripande* (far-reach-

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ing), *reell* (real), *verklig* (genuine), *revolutionerande* (revolutionary), *omstörtande* (subversive), *frisinnad* (liberal-minded), *reformivrande* (eager for reform), *avancerad* (advanced), *vänstersinnad* (with leftist leanings), *ytterlighetsgående* (excessive).

In the 60s and 70s, *radikal* (radical) was very much a commendatory term. I remember once using the term *radikal* in connection with a terrorist group and encountering protest from the audience, among which people happily called themselves radicals. The word, in the opinion of the audience, should not be applied to terrorists.

In its present usage, we can hardly find the word *radikal* in the sense of 'leftist', 'liberal-minded' or 'genuine'. The usage has developed into stressing the sense of 'extremist', 'excessive' and 'subversive'. Its use as characterisation of religious groups is also new. This is due to changes in the view of the relationship between religion and politics in the political debate. In the sixties 'religion' was, in general, regarded as being without any real political significance or influence. Religion in politics was something that belonged to the past and had disappeared with modernity. The connection between religion and war also belonged to history. If it still existed in what was, at that time, called the Third World, it would certainly disappear with modern development. In the sixties, I wrote a number of articles intended for newspapers on the political significance of Islam in the Muslim world, but they were generally politely refused with the explanation that 'they were interesting, but the topic was too marginal to be of interest to the general public'.

The Libyan leader Muammar al-Qadhdhafi arranged for a conference of 'religious dialogue' to be held in Tripoli in 1976, to be attended by Muslim scholars, Christian leaders, and representatives of the Vatican (led by cardinal Pignedoli). His intention was to present and promote his 'Green Book' and his ideas on religion and politics. He invited governments around the world to send representatives to the conference, including the Swedish government. The Swedish government expressed no interest in the matter. Neither did any of the parliamentarians. The same applied to the bishops in the Church of Sweden. The Libyan diplomat in charge at the time asked for advice from the pastor of the French protestant congregation in Stockholm, who suggested that he could invite a professor at the Faculty of

Theology in Uppsala. No one was willing to go, but they mentioned that there was a young, newly appointed assistant professor who was interested in Islamic matters. Perhaps he could go.

So, I became the Swedish representative at the Tripoli dialogue conference, sitting among ministers and diplomats, patriarchs, archbishops and grand muftis. And – very valuably for me – some of the most internationally prominent researchers in Islamic studies of the time were also there.

This lack of interest is visible in the textbooks on history of religions used at that time. Connections between politics and religion in contemporary times were hardly ever addressed. If they were, it was from the perspective of 'secularisation'. The most-used textbook was *Religionerna i historia och nutid* (by Helmer Ringgren and Åke V. Ström), of which many editions were published from 1957 onwards. The textbook on phenomenology of religion was *Religionens värld* (by Geo Widengren, several editions from 1953 onwards). Our textbook on methodology was *Metodvägar inom den jämförande religionsforskningen* (by Åke Hultkrantz, 1973). In none of these was 'religion and politics' a topic of interest.

But then something happened that changed this worldview and perspective: The Iranian Revolution of 1978–1979. With immense astonishment, politicians, political scientists, media and (eventually) also those involved in religious studies noticed the phenomenon of Ayatullah Khomeini. In 1977, the Faculty of Theology at Uppsala University had given an honorary doctor's degree to Seyyid Hossein Nasr, a thinker and writer in religious philosophy. He happened to be closely connected with the Iranian Shah and his family. Iranian students in Uppsala protested this and suggested that such an honour should instead have been given to a theologian who was in opposition to the Shah: namely Ayatullah Ruhullah Khomeini. (This suggestion was supported by one of the younger teachers in theology – who later became a bishop in the Church of Sweden).

I find in my notes from 1978 that in that year, I noticed a new phenomenon for the very first time: a suicide attack was called a martyrdom. Traditionally, suicide is completely *ḥarām*, totally forbidden and a sin leading to Hell, not to Paradise. A young man had wrapped explosives around his waist and hurled himself in front of a tank, blowing it up. The revolutionaries pro-

claimed him a martyr: he had given his life as a sacrifice in a legitimate struggle (*jihād*) in the path of God. I noticed this specifically because it was new. Traditionally, a martyr had to be killed by someone else. Suicide actions were previously associated with the Japanese kamikaze pilots in the Second World War, with the story of Samson (Judges 16) in the Bible, as well as with some events in the Kurdish struggle and with the suicides used as protest by Buddhist monks in Indo-China who burned themselves to death. But characterising a suicide as martyrdom, and the perpetrator as a martyr (*shahīd*), was new in an Islamic context.

The phenomenon became common, especially after the very successful action in Beirut on 23 October 1983: two trucks loaded with explosives entered the headquarters of the US Marine Corps and the cantonment of the French parachutists. The result proved the enormous effectivity of the method: two casualties on the attacking side, and on the other, 241 American and 58 French soldiers killed. The political effect was considerable too: both the USA and France abandoned their military presences in Lebanon. The Shiite Hizbullah proclaimed the two perpetrators martyrs. In the following decades, 'the self-chosen martyrdom' (*istishhād*) became and has remained a well-established method among jihadist groups. This was a new phenomenon in the 1980s and was regarded as extreme, but not as 'radical' in the sense of 'leftist' or 'liberal' or 'advanced'.

I can see changes in my own use of the word *radikal* (and its derivation *radikalisering*) in my published texts over time. In the popular handbook *Islam, lära och livsmönster* (Islam, Doctrine and Pattern of Life) from 1979, religion and politics – political Islam – is treated as being connected with the Wahhabi ideology in Saudi Arabia. But the word *radikal* is not used. In *Araber och Arabism* (Arabs and Arabism, 1996, 2007), the term is used, but in the sense of 'far-reaching', 'advanced': *radikal förändring* (radical change), *radikalt nytänkande* (radical new thinking). In one sentence, however, there is a slight slip in its meaning:

... de islamistiska radikalerna, 'fundamentalisterna' (*usūliyyūn*) som definierar staten i religiösa termer' (... the Islamist radicals, the 'fundamentalists', those defining the state in religious terms).

The terms Islamists/Islamism had appeared in the French public debate as a terminological distinction proposed by the newspaper *Le Monde* to express the difference between the wider notion of 'Islam' and the narrower concept of political Islam, and thus also the distinction between *musulmanes* and *islamistes*. Islamism was defined as the religion being regarded and proclaimed as a political ideology, or rather, as an order for an ideal state. This distinction very soon became used in Arabic too: *muslimūn* – *islāmiyyūn*.

In that book (*Araber och Arabism*) I used, in quotation marks, the word '*fundamentalisterna*' (the fundamentalists). As a term used about Islamists, it was quite misleading due to its association with phenomena in the church history of the USA, which was unlike what we saw in the Islamist movements. Although it was, for a time, a rather common designation for these movements, it soon disappeared. Simultaneously, the term 'les intégristes' was used in the French debate – likewise misleading, as it expressed a comparison with conservative Catholics, those who were opposed to the reforms promulgated by the Second Vatican Council. As a loanword in Swedish, '*integrister*' was very seldom used.

The Arab term *uṣūliyyūn* for 'radicals' was a translational loanword from the Latin *radix* (root), in Arabic *aṣl* (plural *uṣūl*). That, too, was a little misleading, as the word *uṣūl* is traditionally the term for the basic topics in the study of the religion (*uṣūl ad-dīn*) in the education of religious functionaries.

We might note that the term *islamism/islamist* with the specific meaning of being connected with political Islam was not found in Swedish before this. The word '*islamism*' did exist, but at that time it was as a synonym for '*islam*'. The change in meaning came as a loan from the French terminological innovation.

In the same book (*Araber och Arabism*), I mention '*nutidens vänsterradikala grupper i arabvärlden*' (the contemporary radical leftist groups in the Arab world), but also '*det radikalt militanta Hizbullah i Libanon*' (the radically militant Hizbullah in Lebanon), and the occupants of the *ḥaram* in Makka at the turn of the *hijra* century of 1400 (in November 1979) are characterised as '*radikala islamister*' (radical Islamists). But the 'real/really' meaning is still present: various groups have '*radikalt olika synsätt*' (radically different views). The term was yet not

specifically connected with Islamism. In that book, I call Adonis and Mahfouz '*radikala författare*' (radical authors) whose lives are at risk daily.

There are some terms which are now in common use which I do not (yet) use in *Araber och Arabism*, 2002: *mutaṭarrifūn* (extremists) and *irhābiyyūn* (terrorists). These words arrived later, like the terms 'jihadists' and *salafyyūn*, the latter of which has now become *salafister* in the Swedish media.

In *Profetens mantel* (The Mantle of the Prophet, 2007) several groups are characterised as being 'radically militant', but the word still sometimes retains its positive aspect: 'The Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi could criticize the policy of the Iranian regime and ask for radical changes (*radikala förändringar*); radical here meaning 'profound'. But in this book, obviously for the first time, I make use of the derivate *radikaliserad* (radicalised). After the failure of the so-called Oslo [peace] process, there arose in the Palestinian population 'A more pronounced sympathy for the radical forces, more persons willing to perform suicide attacks. The US administration associated the radicalisation (*radikaliseringen*) with the spread of terrorism.' The Swedish term was clearly just an adaptation from the use of the word in American English.

From that point, the term lost its more-or-less positive connotations. Developments in Somalia are described: '...the Islamist militia was radicalised (*radikaliserades*) into an extremist guerrilla movement (i.e. *ash-shabāb*)'. And of another group it is said that it is likely 'going into a radically (*radikalt*) jihadist tendency'.

This use of the term is now a common one in my texts. In *Förändringens vind* (The Wind of Change, 2009) I compare the militant Islamist groups with the extremist leftist movements in the 1970s (Baader-Meinhof etc.), even if the term *radikal* still sometimes retains its meaning of 'profound': feminist theology exists in 'more or less radical forms'.

I observe that I have successively adapted my terminology to the now-general use of the term in the media concerning Islamist jihadist groups, where it is associated with ideologies of violence and dualistic worldviews, and used in endeavours to isolate Muslims or to promote the enclavisation of the populations of suburbs in large cities.

We thus find the whole arsenal of terms in the book *Islam-*

ismer ('Islamisms', 2010): *Radikalisering* (radicalisation), *irhābiyyūn*, *islāmiyyūn*, *mutatarrifūn* and *salafiyya*.

So. The word *radikal* (radical), and its derivation *radikalisering* (radicalisation), now have a different field of mental associations than they used to. They are not used to mean 'leftist' or 'liberal', 'free thinkers', or similar meanings. They have a completely negative connotation.

A last note: in the few things I have written since 2010, I seem to have entirely abolished my use of the words '*radikal*' and '*radikalisering*'. Their frequent use to designate Muslims has made the terms dubious and questionable.

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