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On “Islamic” and “Islamist Terrorism”

Posted By Gary Leupp
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Donald Trump declares that the Orlando nightclub massacre shows that he “was right on Islamic terrorism” all along, once again chiding Obama for avoiding that label. Hillary Clinton for the first time uses a similar term in an interview with Savannah Guthrie on NBC New’s Today Show.

She says, “To me, radical jihadism, radical Islamism, I think they mean the same thing. I’d be happy to say either.” The news media has treated this as a major shift; and Trump was quick to take credit.

Actually, there is a subtle difference in terminology. “Islamic” used by Trump is a synonym for “Muslim” when used as an adjective; but it has a somewhat broader application. One is more likely to talk about Islamic rather than Muslim civilization, art, science, etc. But it mainly refers to traditional religion-based activity.

Clinton’s term Islamist, on the other hand, is generally understood to refer to views and activities of modern political movements to reorder society in accordance with some conception of Islamic law (the sharia).

Thus, calling someone an “Islamic terrorist” associates Islam in general (as a religion) with terror, while calling someone an “Islamist terrorist” associates the person with a political movement enjoying limited support in the Islamic world that consists of some 1.6 billion people.

But “Islamism” is a vague concept. There are Islamists who accept multiparty democracy and participate in elections, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt that won seats in parliament in 2000, 2005 (during which it courted Coptic Christians’ support by pledging to work against restrictions on church construction) and 2011-12. (Recall that Brotherhood member Mohamed Morsi became president in 2011, only to be toppled by the U.S.-backed military within a year.)

Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), an ally of the Muslim Brotherhood, began as a self-defined Islamist party in 1983. It has since officially abandoned that term but it was never anything like the Islamist Taliban in Afghanistan.

The Palestinian Hamas (“Change and Reform”) party, which won the 2006 election and administers Gaza, is an Islamist and nationalist party committed in theory to Israel’s destruction while maintaining a de facto long term truce with Israel. Lebanon’s Hizbollah is another Islamist and nationalist party, rooted in the country’s large Shiite minority but enjoying significant support from Christians and others. It holds two cabinet positions. Both of these (quite different) organizations are of course regarded as “terrorists” by Israel and the U.S. because their militias have carried out “terrorist” attacks on the Jewish state.

The Taliban in Afghanistan is a Pashtun-based nationalist and Islamist organization that was praised in 1996 by Zalmay Khalilzad—future U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, then Iraq, then the U.N.—as a group that “do not practice the anti-U.S. style of fundamentalism practiced by Iran,” to which the U.S. should “be willing to offer recognition and humanitarian assistance...” Their rule was harsh, but the U.S. did not consider them “terrorists.”

But after 9/11 the Talibs were tarred with the same brush as al-Qaeda, another—much smaller and very different—Islamist organization consisting mostly of Arabs who had set up camp in Afghanistan before the Taliban came to power and were tolerated by a regime likely unaware of its global terror plots.

Some Arab states including Saudi Arabia are governed by Islamists, who strictly enforce Sharia law. Shiite-led Iran is also governed by a law code rooted in the Sharia. This commitment to some version of the Sharia is the key element of Islamism as a broad political phenomenon.

So Islamism is a pretty vague construct, even when used by journalists and academics. There are self-defined Islamists committed to peaceful change, based upon sincere religious faith; Islamists engaged in armed nationalist struggles; Islamists who pull off large and small terror attacks; Islamists (in Saudi Arabia) who receive billions in U.S. military aid every year.

To call the lone wolf mass-murderer Omar Mateen an “Islamist terrorist” as Clinton does implies that he did what he did in order to somehow contribute to a process of imposing Sharia law on the U.S.—which is doubtful. His connection to Islamism includes some statements over the years to others, claiming involvement with incompatible Islamist groups including Hizbollah, ISIL and al-Nusra, and some mention of ISIL in his 911 call. (It will be interesting to hear the specific wording of that call.)

Mateen, it now turns out, was a heavy drinker who went to Orlando’s Pulse nightclub to pick up men. That is not the profile of an Islamist but of a self-hater torn between homophobic religious beliefs (which are not shared by all Muslims; there are lots of GLBT Muslims and, and homosexuality is legal in 20 Muslim-majority countries) and his own desires. He is a terrorist by definition. But an Islamist? Not your typical one, surely.

So how about Trump’s choice, “Islamic terrorist?” This too strikes me as even more analytically unhelpful, focusing not on his politics but on his religion itself.

There have been many terrorists who profess Christianity. It is at the heart of the Ku Klux Klan, symbolized by the burning cross. Roman Catholicism was a defining characteristic of the IRA during its “terror” period. The Norwegian mass-child-murderer Anders Breivik pronounced himself a “cultural Christian.” The Christian Phalange Party of Lebanon has committed numerous massacres of Palestinians. Guatemala’s President Efraim Rio Montt led a vicious war against his people in the 1980s and was eventually convicted of genocide and crimes against humanity. (He was among other things a minister in the evangelical California-based Church of the Word and friend of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson.)

There’s great diversity here, are there is among terrorists professing Islam. But how often have such people been referred to, or even conceptualized, as “Christian terrorists” much less “Christian-ist terrorists”? What if some Klasmens led by a church pastor beat a black man to death and the media reported it as “an act of Christian terrorism”? People would protest: “Wait, that’s not fair. Just because they were Christians doesn’t make them Christian terrorists. It wasn’t like their religion made them do it. Maybe in their own minds they were inspired by some warped interpretation of the Bible, but you shouldn’t hurt the feelings of 2.2 billion people by throwing around that term. Anyway they’re not real Christians.”

Because many Muslims respond to terror events and their media coverage in the same way. “They committed a terrible crime!” they’ll say. “But anyway they weren’t real Muslims.”

It’s not for me (a non-Christian and non-Muslim) to determine who is or isn’t really one of either of those. I assume both religions claim the sincere allegiance of very good and very evil people alike, with most somewhere in between. But to identify an act of terrorism as “Islamic” or “Islamist” or “Muslim” (the masses probably don’t much distinguish between these terms and

are unaware of their nuances) is to implicate the religion in a way that never applies to Christianity. It contributes to non-Muslims' perception of the religion as somehow especially terror prone.

As for this Sharia business—and some Americans' baseless fears that Muslims want to impose it on the U.S.—maybe we should think about it this way.

Islam preaches the existence of the One God who created the heavens and the earth, humankind and laws to govern humankind inscribed in a holy book. Does that sound threatening to you? Because that's also basic Judaism. A large portion of what Jews call the Tanakh, and Christians call the Old Testament, consists of the so-called Laws of Moses received directly (according to Jewish and Christian belief) from God Himself.

They include, alongside the Ten Commandments, a massive number of laws governing diet, ritual purity, worship practices, etc. They require newborn boys to be circumcised. They specify death for adultery and homosexuality. Just as does the Qur'an, a book compiled in the seventh century inspired by Jewish scriptures undoubtedly known to the Prophet Muhammad.

That is to say, the Sharia is basically an emanation of the Laws of Moses in the Bible, part of what we can call the "Judeo-Christian-Islamic" tradition.

Few of today's Jews follow all the laws found in the books of Exodus and Leviticus (or would approve the brutal punishments specified). Christians meanwhile generally see them as inapplicable to themselves, perhaps citing St. Paul's epistles and his insistence that circumcision and observance of Jewish dietary laws etc. was unnecessary for them. Few Christians or Jews are asking for biblical law to become the law of the land.

Islamists on the other hand believe that the solution to today's problems is to be found in the implementation of the Sharia. (Indeed in many Muslim-majority countries, including Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Sharia is at least referenced in the constitution as the basis of law.) I of course strongly disagree with this. But this Islamist advocacy of the Sharia alone motivates very few Muslims to try to impose it through terrorism.

In other words, neither Islam nor Islamism in themselves explain such phenomena as al-Qaeda and ISIL, and to refer to their terrorism as one or the other is misleading, prejudicial, inflammatory and unfair to 22% of the world's population.