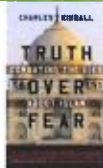


Islamic truth, jihadi youth

Philip Lewis looks at the radicalisation problem

Truth Over Fear: Combating the lies about Islam: A guide for Christians and Muslims working together
Charles Kimball

WJK £12.99
 (978-0-66426462-8)
 Church Times Bookshop £11.70



Wandering Souls
Tobie Nathan

Polity £15.99
 (978-1-5095-3496-8)
 Church Times Bookshop
 £14.40



THESE two short studies explore the unsettling impact of jihadi violence in the United States and France respectively. Both distill a lifetime's experience and wisdom.

Kimball is an academic and inter-faith activist who, in 1979, was one of a handful of American clergy to meet Ayatollah Khomeini and liaise with the US hostages. Nathan worked for 45 years with migrants in France in the field of ethnopsychiatry — a blend of anthropology and clinical psychology. In 2014, the French government entrusted him with the task of counselling radicalised young people drawn to jihadism.

Both authors worry that jihadi violence has led each country to betray its best instincts. In the case of the US, a rank Islamophobia has emerged that risks abridging its cherished value of religious freedom with regard to Muslims. In France, “the problem of radical Islamic youth has not only invaded the media . . . [and] anaesthetised our brains . . . [but] trashed our ideals”.

Both seek to humanise a one-dimensional abstraction, “the Muslim”: Kimball, through active inter-faith encounter and co-operation; Nathan, through his richly nuanced case notes of a cross-section of radicalised

young people and their parents which enliven his pages.

The focus of each work is different. Kimball, a specialist in the Abrahamic religions and a Baptist minister, served as Middle East Director for the National Council of Churches in New York, co-ordinating the mission and service ministries of many US denominations in that region. His book, a miracle of compression, serves as a useful primer for Islam and an overview, past and present, of Christian-Muslim relations — both at the level of international initiatives, whether the World Council of Churches or the Vatican, and at city level in the US. It includes a brief biblical mandate for such work.

In all, this is a welcome addition to a growing genre by Christian authors which seeks to address and mitigate the “fear and confusion” about Islam and Muslims in their home countries. In Britain, we are well served by recent studies by Ray Gaston, Richard Sudworth, James Walters, and Tom Wilson.

Tobie Nathan's work has a narrower focus. His book interweaves his own experience as an outsider — arriving in France in 1958 as a nine-year old with his Egyptian Jewish parents after fleeing Cairo — as they illuminate the predicaments of those radicalised young people whom he seeks to understand and counsel.

Wandering Souls strives to craft an adequate conceptual framework in which to make sense of their stories, as indicated in his chapter headings: “Secularity and the War of the Gods”; “Conversion and Initiation”; “Apocalypse”; “Hashish and Assassins”; “Abandoned Children and Political Beings”; and “The Foreignness of Migrant Children”.

His study fizzles with insights. Nathan's involvement in the radical student movement of 1968 suggests clues to the involvement of the young in jihadi movements today. Both then and now, he insists, some young people are attracted to revolutionary movements that co-opt violence and promise a radical new humanity in place of the injustices, cruelties, and exclusions of an old order.

Such a cocktail of ideology, religion, and transformative rhetoric appeals to “wandering souls” — those young people whose personal and family history is characterised by a deficit: “a weakened cultural

identity in the first generation and an uncertain filiation in the second”.

It would be complacent to assume that we have little to learn from such studies in the UK. A recent work on radicalisation here concluded that jihadist ideas were becoming “the default anti-establishment movement for an increasingly diverse community of individuals”, and that, while the security services understood much better the networks and what radicalisation looked like, “there is still little understanding of how to counter and de-radicalise” (Raffaello Pantucci, *We Love Death as You Love Life*).

Dr Philip Lewis is a consultant on Islam and Christian-Muslim relations, advised Bishops of Bradford for some three decades, and taught in Peace Studies at Bradford University.

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