

## MEASURES FOR COUNTER TERRORISM: RETHINKING U.K. GOVERNMENT'S PREVENT STRATEGY [1]

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### ABSTRACT

The media, and reliable scholarly sources indicate that the U.K. Government's PREVENT counter-terrorism strategy—in which I have no expertise or involvement—has had patchy results. In some areas PREVENT has had a toxic effect, some seeing it as a spying, surveillance, and intelligence-gathering organization to increase its own referrals. But it is making good progress in some communities, especially those that are fully supportive and engaged.

### INTRODUCTION

The aim here is to suggest that the British Government's PREVENT policy might have greater success if it focused more on beliefs than on "good behavior" or on socio-economic factors. Particularly, on religious beliefs and their nature. Without first-hand knowledge of terrorists' beliefs, one can only guess that their actions are motivated by deep yet mistaken beliefs and prejudices. Whether it is a white fanatical extremist—perhaps antireligious and racist—driving a van into people leaving a mosque, or a Muslim extremist driving into pedestrians on Westminster Bridge in London. An effective and balanced PREVENT policy would be even-handed, discouraging all forms of violent extremism and racism and not give the wrong impression that its main problem is with only the *Muslim* radicals.

It is presumably *white* extremists who chose to announce, in their anonymous letters to six U.K. centres, that the date "3 April 2018" was their "Punish a Muslim Day"<sup>[2]</sup> Fortunately, it misfired because communities responded with love and solidarity, using a successful counter-hashtag #LoveAMuslimDay in reply to #PunishAMuslimDay, as well as the #WeStandTogether campaign against all forms of hate crimes.

The Manchester Arena atrocity on 21 May 2017, moved me to start writing in an area out of my comfort zone and academic specialty. I was prompted further by the U.K. trial and conviction of Darren Osborne for the Finsbury Park killing and the alarming increase in crimes by other white extremists in the U.S.A., including the recent brutal attack on a congregation of worshippers in a synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I am out of my depth in such complex motivations but in so far as they involve tensions between Christianity and Islam, it would be sensible to include their historical roots by writing on Judaism too. The Middle East remains in turmoil, Jewish-Palestinian relations are inflamed, a two-state solution is as distant as ever, and a rise in anti-Semitism is evident not only in the U.K. but the United States and elsewhere as well <sup>[3]</sup>

### THE MANCHESTER ATTACK AND MUSLIM RESPONSE

Immediately after the news of the Manchester concert attack causing deaths and injuries, the following commendable comments, primarily from Muslims, were heard on BBC Radio 4 Today:

Terrorism has no part in Islam.

Love is stronger than hate.

We must combat radicalization.

We will not be defeated by terrorists.

We are one, we are together as one community, irrespective of religion, race, color, sexual orientation.

The Communities Secretary, Sajid Javid, said: “As British Muslims, we must do more than just condemn” [4] The Oxford Foundation founded by Imam Monawar Hussain does more than condemn: it promotes inter-faith dialogue and does valuable educational work with young people to help them make a full contribution to British society.

The Karimia Institute works across England “and has developed centres for worship, education, and self-development...to improve community relations”. Notably its Trust Building initiative in 2016, using its trained ambassadors amongst communities in Nottingham, aims “to build trust between Muslims and the larger community, in response to the rise of Islamophobia and hate crimes against the Muslim community” [5].

Last summer, more than 30,000 Ahmadi Muslims from 100 countries gathered in Hampshire to promote “the true, peaceful teachings of Islam”, and avoid misinterpretations, and hear their leader “reject all forms of extremism and terrorism”.

While we may applaud all these valuable comments and activities, we may also question if they are sufficient. If beliefs motivate the radical or extremist to become a terrorist all of us need to challenge the validity of any belief that might motivate violence to achieve a supposed good objective. PREVENT’s best strategy might be to demotivate, through reasoning, critical thinking and respectful, frank discussion of religious beliefs, to see if they hold water as true or if they are mistaken.

The terrorist who believes the West is at least partly to blame for the way the world is, has good grounds for that belief. I joined over a million demonstrators in Hyde Park on 15 February, 2003, protesting against the imminent war in Iraq. Though American President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair thought they were doing the right and good thing, subsequent repercussions in the Middle East have proven otherwise.

## **THE ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS**

Indeed, Judaism, Christianity and Islam [6] have been a mixed blessing to the world. Three thousand years ago Jews invaded and occupied the Promised Land, strong in their belief that they are God’s chosen people. Early Islam expanded rapidly by force, and Christian crusades retaliated in the Holy Land. The Christian Inquisition executed and burned heretics to defend orthodoxy.

Any Western government that believes right is wholly on its side and wrong is entirely on the side of warring Muslims and Jews has no credibility. Admission of guilt by all sides is one way forward. All three religions have differences of opinion: each has traditionalists, extremists, and radicals. But despite splits between Shia and Sunni Muslims, the Qur’an upholds a noble belief that humans should live in community under God, in family solidarity. So, a terrorist may feel obliged to fight on the side of his fellow terrorists, and take revenge for perceived past and present injustices. Yet the cycle of tit for tat violence requires a deeper solution, as Archbishop Tutu showed successfully in South Africa through his Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Forgiveness is hard but it can bring healing and harmony between enemies. As I have stated earlier “Religious beliefs are not certainties but convictions that take risks because they cannot be proved true. Faith requires us to live bravely with doubt and uncertainty” [7].

This statement may surprise those atheists who think all believers are deluded, blind to the possibility that religious beliefs may be nothing more than what we humans have invented, disconnected from the real world. But probably most believers in all religions are wiser than that, and distinguish between major and minor beliefs, keeping a firm grip on a few fundamental truths, but a relaxed grip on inessential beliefs. That twofold distinction means that to some extent beliefs are provisional, redefined in the light of experience as we grow up. Old ideas can be given fresh meaning in modern English and live on as contemporary truth, especially from new interpretations of their Scriptures and novel insights from modern science, the arts, and cultural changes.

In the past many Jews, Christians and Muslims have been intolerant, with closed not open minds—too quick to label new ideas as blasphemy against what is sacred and ancient tradition, instead of carefully

judging each innovation on its merits. Any truth that deserves to last can survive criticism—such as the Darwinian “survival of the fittest” in the natural world. New arguments may make unreasonable beliefs wobble, shaking a fundamental into an inessential, or blowing away inessentials as outdated dogma, no longer credible.

## **A STRUCTURED COURSE**

To further the discussion, I have constructed a list of questions on important areas of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The audiences I have in mind for these questions are grassroots believers, men and women aged mainly 16–55 years, so the questions are in plain language not theological jargon, and some may appear elementary to religious leaders and academics.

The practical purpose of the list is to provide a structured course for group discussion of open-ended questions—which are not intended to have right or wrong answers! As the course structure in seven sections builds a logical sequence, the most benefit will be achieved by following that order. But each section could stand alone, so groups may start anywhere they wish, depending on what is most relevant or interesting to them at that time. A one-hour discussion may be enough for one or two sections but each of the other sections will probably need a couple or more of meetings.

The aims are threefold:

- (1) To promote understanding and dialogue within and between religions. This will be best achieved if the groups are multi-faith but single-religion groups will also benefit.
- (2) To encourage believers to be critical thinkers, using their minds—as well as their hearts—about their religion as much as they would in their jobs or academic pursuits.
- (3) To provide a working model for PREVENT in U.K. to organize interfaith discussion groups, and training for their leaders, so that all members of a group are encouraged to voice their views, listen to and value each other’s opinions, and agree to disagree amicably.

The point is not to reach a consensus but to air differences. Discussions like these over several weeks might cause some potential extremists—of whatever religion or race or ethnicity—to reach understanding and find moderate, peaceful means to achieve harmony and peace.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is important to stress that the purpose of this course is not to evangelize or show one religion as superior to others but rather to increase respect for each other’s faiths— and to value the differences, from which I benefited during my nine years of teaching in multi-cultural Uganda. The course is offered to PREVENT in U.K. for a productive experiment, providing all participants with an enjoyable opportunity to reach a more mature understanding of their own and others’ faith. As a result, participants who previously believed violence was the only solution, may become empowered by PREVENT to find more reasonable, non-violent routes to achieving positive goals.

Beyond PREVENT, there are wider audiences for believers in all three Abrahamic religions to engage in critical thinking, and dialogue within and between religions. With good publicity, the course list might appeal to youth groups, 6th forms, universities, U3A, and professional groups such as Probus and Rotary. Above all, it may well appeal to numerous members of synagogues, churches and mosques, and their house groups. Though single religion groups will feel safer arenas for most people, the most enjoyable learning will occur in multi-faith groups. The course questions might encourage an expansion in the network of inter-faith house groups, to promote greater understanding of each other’s faith, in an open and a friendly atmosphere.

## **COURSE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:**

*The JMMA article ends without these questions but its footnote 9 encouraged an immediate read online: "The Spectrum Questions...were too many to be included in this article, but JMMA readers will be able to find them immediately on [www.contemporarycreed.org.uk/pdf/Spectrum%20Questions.pdf](http://www.contemporarycreed.org.uk/pdf/Spectrum%20Questions.pdf)." For your convenience,*

*John Morris has put those online questions below, so you now have a combination of article and questions, as he always intended.*

## **1. Belief**

1a. Doubt and uncertainty. Do you agree that the only certainty we have is death, not religious certainty?

1b. Provisional. Do you agree that beliefs are temporary, expressing your current thinking rather than what you will always think? We change our jobs, few of us ending up where we began; could beliefs change too? Young adults may be confidently dogmatic but later discover things are more complex and less clear-cut than before.

1c. Do you think it is embarrassing or shameful to change your mind or to reject the views of your parents and family? [8]

1d. Which religious beliefs do you think are major or fundamental? And which are minor, with nothing important hanging on them, so they can be put in the background? [9]

1e. Science. Should religious beliefs be kept in a separate compartment, insulated from modern science where all truths are provisional not timeless? New evidence may disprove previous theories, partly replacing Newton with Einstein. Our daily lives rely on science and technology, so for what reasons would we want to shut it out of our religion?

1f. 'Ought'- how we should or ought to behave. The Jews gave the world the Ten Commandments, and it continues to be a powerful religious and moral compass. Do you believe the ten are authoritative rules that tell you how you should act today in every situation or do they require re-interpretation and give you some flexibility or wriggle room? Which texts in your Scriptures amend or add to the list of ten? [10]

## **2. Authority.**

2a. Where does your ultimate authority lie, in your own mind, or family, your religion, your Scriptures, religious leaders, tradition, or a mix of all?

2b. If there is disagreement between them, how would you like it resolved?

### 2.1 Scriptural authority.

How do you know that your Scriptures are God's Word? Is it because it says so - it is self-validating - or is there some external evidence that supports it? [11]

Muslims are much more united on the answer to my question than Jews and Christians, believing the Qur'an is the reliable Word of Allah, and beyond criticism. What the Qur'an says, Allah says [12].

### 2.2 Scriptural interpretation.

2.2a. Is the meaning of Scripture always self-evident, transparent, or is interpretation often difficult and ambiguous? Give examples of any obscure texts.

2.2b. If some historical sections are irrelevant today, can they be ignored, so that what matters is contemporary truths?

2.2c. Which important texts are understood not as literally true but as poetic or symbolic truth? This is complicated, because if texts are not taken at their face value, but are open to different interpretations, is your interpretation as good as anyone else's? Whose interpretation is correct? [13]

### 2.3 Scriptural consistency.

2.3a. Give examples of texts that look as though they contradict another (perhaps partly from translation difficulties).

2.3b. If there are contradictions, how do you decide which text to believe and obey, especially on important subjects? [14]

## 2.4 Finished Scriptures.

2.4a. Are your Scriptures a complete guide today, telling you all you need to know about how to behave and serve God and be with him for ever?

2.4b. What else would you want the Scriptures to tell you? Some Christians believe in ongoing revelation, so they slightly amend and add to the Bible where it omits guidance about today's religious, moral, or gender problems.

2.4c. 'Change' is the signature or hallmark of our evolving universe. Does that pose a problem for all three religions of how to change with the times? As the Qur'an is unalterable, is the problem greater or less? Could a religion be better by not admitting change? Why? [15]

## 3. Tolerance and free speech [16].

3a. What are the most famous Scriptural texts that encourage tolerance and hospitality towards immigrants, different races, and unbelievers? Tolerance gives permission for differences to exist; it means tolerating patiently what we may not like or endorse [17].

3b. Multiculturalism and Assimilation. Which texts, if any, encourage mixed marriages and social integration between different cultures? Which texts require separatism between those of different faiths?

3c. If tolerance is always good, do you want everyone to have the right to wear, write, do, speak, and believe what they like? Or are there legitimate limits on human rights and freedom, where your increased freedom reduces mine, so one gains and the other loses?

3d. Good intolerance. The Ten Commandments imply it is good to be intolerant of ten things. Are there other things your Scriptures do not tolerate and perhaps punish - e.g. some beliefs, words and actions in your home, community and country?

Does the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights mean that genocide, rape and child abuse are offences that no decent human would ever tolerate? If so, the prohibition is absolute, always binding. That 'ought' may seem firm ground on which to build the common good. Its opposite is the shifting sands of what is called 'relativism', where instead of an agreed standard, right and good are relative to different cultures and times, and vary from person to person, and each person's opinion is equally valid. Geneva Convention rules of war exist [18]. They forbid the bombing of civilians, so the UN has often called for bombing in Syria and Yemen to stop to allow humanitarian aid and evacuation.

## 4. Killing

4a. Is it ever permissible to kill another, despite the 6th commandment given to Moses? "Do not commit murder"[19].

4b. Which texts command believers to expand or defend the faith by force, and to punish blasphemy and unbelievers?

4c. Retaliation. When provoked, which texts justify killing, especially in solidarity with Muslim brothers, e.g. against Western military operations in Muslim countries?

Is there a contradiction between a religion of peace and what so-called 'Christian countries' did in WW1 and WW2, including the Holocaust? While fighting each other, each country felt it was morally right and God was on its side [20].

4d. Consequences. If self-defence involves random punishments or killing (as presumably white extremists threatened on "Punish a Muslim Day"; or when Isis shot not only Western soldiers but - accidentally - some innocent Muslims and children too) which texts in your Scriptures would approve?

4e. As a last resort, can war be justified as the least evil alternative?

## 5. Suicide

5a. Is suicide permitted in your Scriptures? If so, which texts, and for what reasons?

5b. What are the best arguments for and against taking your own life? Some who once believed in suicide as the best option, later say they are glad they failed.

## 6. Martyrs

6a. Is the best martyr one who dies not for reward but for the sake of others? [21]

6b. Guarantee: which texts make it clear that brave acts of terrorism or martyrdom for the faith cancel previous misbehaviour and guarantee entry to heaven? Without a guarantee, what does the bomber have to gain by suicide, especially if his motives are mixed and many innocent victims die with him?

6c. Equality: which texts promise an equal paradise for both sexes? Scriptures were written in patriarchal times, when male not female rights were paramount. But in fairness, are we entitled to interpret Scriptures as wanting equal rights for women too? [22]

## 7. Life after death.

7a. Can we be certain that death is not the end, even though "you are dust and to dust you will return?" [23]

7b. Do your Scriptures make it clear whether the afterlife is an eternal physical or spiritual existence? There is little evidence in the Hebrew Bible of personal survival and identity, yet Old Testament Jews still believed in God. Cremations, not burials, are now the preferred choice for most Protestant Christians, without - it seems - destroying belief in the possibility of a new future identity, or a mysteriously transformed resurrected 'body'. But Orthodox Jews and Muslims choose burials, preferably soon after death.

7c. Merit or gift. In your Scriptures does heaven have to be earned by good behaviour and charitable acts? If so, can anyone be certain they have done enough to merit a place, especially if they have done terrible things? If entry depends on the unknown discretion of God at the Last Judgement who will have mercy on some but not others, is it true that the terrorist has no more chance of entry than anyone else?[24]

7d. If the afterlife is physical, do humans have resurrected bodies similar to our present sexual bodies, capable of reproducing and expanding the population in heaven, but without ageing? Jesus and the Qur'an seem to have different answers here. When asked about husbands and wives in heaven, Jesus replied that in eternity life was different, asexual "like the angels"[25]. The Qur'an and the hadiths believe sexuality continues [26].

7e. what scientific or other evidence is there that suggests a physical afterlife on planet Earth which sooner or later will itself die, along with the Sun?

## NOTES

[1]. The PREVENT Strategy is part of the U.K. Government's counter-terrorism strategy CONTEST and aims to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/counter-terrorism-strategy-contest-2018> (accessed 10 October 2018).

[2]. See The Guardian, Tuesday, 3 April, 2018: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/apr/03/ukcommunities-take-action-against-punish-a-muslim-day-letter> (accessed 10 October 2018).

[3]. The Guardian, 31 March, 2018, reported: The Gaza Strip is reeling from the bloodiest episode in years after Israeli forces killed more than a dozen people during demonstrations...as part of a "Great March of Return" protest demanding refugees and their descendants be allowed to return to their ancestral homes in Israel. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/.../2018/mar/31/weary-angry-gazans-bury-dead-after-dead>. (accessed 10 October 2018).

[4]. See The Times, June 5, 2017. See: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/as-british-muslims-we-must-domore-than-just-condemn-says-sajid-javid-cms9rx9g8> (accessed 10 October 2018).

[5]. Emily Knox, et al., "Overcoming the Fear of the 'Other'", Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs, Vol. 37, No. 4, December 2017, pp. 472–473. It was weekly games of tennis with Muslims and Hindus in Uganda that first helped me to form close friendships and overcome the fear of the 'other'

[6] The order of the three religions here is historical, indicating that Christianity grew out of Judaism, and Islam later included elements of both.

[7] John Morris, *Contemporary Creed: Reasonable Pathways through the Problems of Christian Beliefs and Ethics*, Winchester, UK, Washington, USA: O-Books, John Hunt Publishing, 2012, page 15.

[8]. Some of the most intelligent people I know have changed their minds on big issues. Teenage rebellion against parents has always been true of all cultures - we all like to do things our way, not only in religious beliefs, but in dress, haircuts, marriage, jobs, where to live, etc.

[9]. My own 100 word creed on my website shows what I think is central to Christianity, omitting less vital beliefs. [www.contemporarycreed.org.uk](http://www.contemporarycreed.org.uk)

[10]. The word 'texts' is used throughout to include verses (ayat) and chapters (suras).

[11]. I use the word 'God' to include the Jewish 'Jehovah', the Islamic 'Allah' and Christian 'Father'. "The Lord" revealed himself to Abraham (Genesis 12) and when he called Moses he said "I am the God of Abraham" (Exodus 3:6).

[12]. The worldwide Christian evangelist Dr Billy Graham (who died in 1918) repeatedly used "God says" and "The Bible says" as identical. For centuries many Christians believed the same and still do. But perhaps many churchgoers today are less fundamentalist and more critical, thinking some parts of the Bible are inappropriate today, and believe the Word of God is not a book but the living Jesus.

[13]. All three religions accept revealed beliefs, God's revelation of himself and his purposes. So the Ten Commandments are taken as the words of God, not Moses' invention. But the opening pages of the Bible are less clear-cut: probably most Christians no longer read them as a scientific diary of creation and accept the evolution of our universe, after its birth nearly 14 billion years ago. Old Testament prophets, instead of saying "I say", would often give their own words greater authority by saying "God says". But sometimes appalling things were put into God's mouth: Samuel ordered the slaughter of Israel's enemies, including women and children, for offences in previous centuries (1 Samuel 15). To put it simply: a God who is good, better than anything we can imagine, would be unlikely to command what the UN would call genocide, as if he were less moral than humans! So to avoid mistakes, deeper re-interpretation of the Scriptures is needed for good theology: here the writer meant Samuel believed it was God's commandment - but we can all make mistakes!

[14]. If at times the hadiths (reports of the prophet Muhammad) disagree with parts of the Qur'an, is the Qur'an always supreme?

[15]. Clearly the Scriptures are not intended to be a sufficient technical guide to get to the Moon or use a mobile or the social media!

[16]. If you think these are about behaviour not belief, I hope what follows will show their importance to religious belief.

[17]. My asking a question does not mean I approve or disapprove. I am here a neutral questioner whom I hope you can tolerate.

[18]. Or IHL, international humanitarian law, as it is known formally.

[19]. Exodus 20:13.

[20]. To avoid excessive revenge, Moses limited retaliation to only one "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (Exodus 21:24). But Jesus replaced it. "You have heard it said 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy'. But I say to you 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'." (Matthew 5:38-44).

[21]. Stephen, a Jew, was the first of many Christian martyrs (Acts 7).

[22]. Gender equality and LGBT rights are issues that have divided Christians. Only recently have women been ordained as priests and a few become bishops in the Anglican Communion but not in the Roman Catholic Church.

[23]. Genesis 3:19.

[24]. In Christianity, heaven is not merited but a free gift on offer in this life by God's grace and forgiveness through Jesus. Some opponents say this is unfair, because belief is easy but earning heaven by continual charity is hard work.

[25]. Matthew 22:30.

[26]. Though Quranic texts describe Paradise, partly sensual, there is no mention of an actual number of virgins given as a reward. One of the six major hadith does report a number but I am told that this report is unreliable