

We need to stop conflating Islam with terrorism

Written by Nicolas Pirsoul, Sessional lecturer in Middle Eastern Politics, Australian Catholic University

The Christchurch terrorist attack has shown us that we need to address the threat posed by far-right extremism to our ideals of peaceful social cooperation in a multicultural society. Unfortunately, in the aftermath of the shooting, some of the worst far-right commentary [has blamed](#) the Christchurch shooting on immigration laws, and Muslim communities themselves.

But these views are also based on notions about culture that are not only false but also dangerous. Islam is a religion, not a race or ethnicity. It is not a threat to our values or way of life.

As a New Zealander academic, my work deals with questions related to Islam and multiculturalism. In the past, I have argued both that Wahhabism – the Sunni fundamentalist form of Islam practised in Saudi Arabia – is [not compatible](#) with liberal democratic values, unlike [some other Islamic schools of thought](#).

As Muslims in the West come under attack, it is essential to understand and distinguish between these different kinds of Islamic thought and how the West responds to them. While it is true that some forms of Islam are incompatible with our values, the fact is this is a minority view. The vast majority of Muslims in the West are peaceful and law-abiding – and one that is more often the target of far-right extremism than Muslims themselves. Most Muslims in the West are not a threat to our values or way of life. It is the work of the West to ensure that all citizens are treated equally and with respect.

Read more: [Right-wing extremism has a long history in Australia](#)

Islam cannot be reduced to a single idea

Right-wing commentators often make statements about Islam and Muslims that are factually incorrect. They demonise Muslims and proclaim that Islam is incompatible with Western democratic values.

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But Islam cannot be reduced to a single theological framework or simplistic worldview. Complex theological debates have taken place over the centuries about the relationship between faith and reason, and the political role of Islam. This has led to a religion that contains multiple branches and schools of thought.

Critics of Islam often mistakenly conflate Islam with Wahhabism. Wahhabism is an Islamic school of thought that promotes violence towards both non-Wahhabi Muslims and non-Muslims by taking an uncritical, literalist, approach to Islamic scriptures.

While its intellectual roots can be traced back to 13th-14th century theologian Ibn Taymiyyah, it only became a genuine political movement in the mid-18th century. This is when the House of Saud entered a religio-political alliance with Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. This alliance is still the foundation of the current Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to this day.

If it was not for the West's continuous support for the contemporary Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for almost a century, Wahhabism might have remained a marginal historical phenomenon within Islam.

Read more: [**Christchurch attacks are a stark warning of toxic political environment that allows hate to flourish**](#)

Muslims are often victims of Wahhabi extremism

The next move from these right-wing figures is usually to argue that Wahhabism is the essence of Islam, and that “moderate Muslims” are just not following their own sacred text. They usually proceed by cherry-picking verses from the Koran and historical narrations to prove that Muhammad was a warlord, a paedophile and a terrorist.

This completely ignores the fact that there have been debates for centuries within Islam over the historical context, interpretation, and even accuracy of these cherry-picked parts of the vast

corpus of Islamic scriptures.

The rest of the scriptures and Islamic history that promotes compassion, justice, and pluralism are never mentioned. Indeed, the broader Muslim community, in many cases, not only theologically disagree with the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, but have sometimes been victims of Wahhabi extremism themselves.

Besides being intellectually dishonest, this hostile attitude contributes greatly to anti-Muslim sentiment in the West.

Right-wing extremism reinforces Islamic extremism

By conflating Wahhabism and mainstream Islam, the far-right is creating and reinforcing the strength of its own enemy. Alienating and harassing Muslims in the West runs the risk of radicalising some of them. And making the argument that Islam is incompatible with democracy and human rights suggest that the Wahhabi reading of Islam is in fact the correct one.

This reinforces the clash of civilisation thesis that argues that Western and Islamic worldviews are so fundamentally incompatible that they are destined to perpetual conflict.

Historically, right-wing policy makers in some Western nations have reinforced the economic and military power of Wahhabi ideologues by creating alliances with proponents of the doctrine in places such as Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan. Even Israel (usually considered as a bastion of democratic values in the Middle East) is now [cosying up](#) to the Wahhabi kingdom because of their mutual fear of Iran.

Let me also highlight that most of the victims of the Wahhabi ideology were and still are Muslims themselves. From the Wahhabi sacking of Karbala in 1802, to the rise of the Taliban, al Qaeda, and Islamic State, countless innocent, mainly Muslim, lives have been lost to Wahhabism in the Middle East.

Read more: [*Finding dignity and grace in the aftermath of the Christchurch attack*](#)

The West must reassess its narrative about Islam

It's natural to want to understand the deeper, root causes, of the Christchurch massacre, and the potential role played by Islamic extremism. But the culprit remains the same: those in the West who promote the idea that Islam and liberal democratic values are incompatible.

They demonise Muslim communities by conflating Islam and the Wahhabi ideology that the West has empowered for many years. Yes, there is a problematic extremist element within the Islamic world, but Western actors, mainly on the right, have aided the Wahhabi ideology in becoming a global phenomenon to the detriment of Muslims themselves.

Instead of blaming Muslim migration and Islamic extremists for the Christchurch massacre, it is time for the West to look into the mirror and reassess their own narratives and actions regarding Islam and the Islamic world.

Nicolas Pirsoul does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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