WHEN RADICALS TURN VIOLENT: LEARNING FROM THE STUDY OF 'CULTS'

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I met Anzor Astemirov briefly in the late 1990s at a conference in Moscow. A shy but articulate and well-mannered young scholar of Islam, he was very passionate about establishing a new Islamic Institute in his native small republic of Kabardino-Balkaria in the Northern Caucasus. Within the following decade or so, Anzor became a leader of the New Muslims movement, engaged in violence against law-enforcement agencies, and ended up as Amir Sayfullah of the Caucasian Emirate, an 'Islamic state' that operates via the Internet and a network of terrorist cells, causing horror in the Northern Caucasus and outside it. In 2010, aged 34, he was killed by Russian security services.

Although so told this story may sound like a perfect example of 'radicalisation', in my research of the New Muslims, 'Salafi' movements in Dagestan, and Islamist movements in London I did not find this concept useful, precisely for the reasons outlined by Matthew Francis.

I suggest that we can understand a great deal more if we approach at least some of new Islamic groups as new religious movements and draw on the rich tradition of studying these groups in the sociology of religion. I put forward three separate but related arguments: First, new Islamic beliefs can find appeal among some, predominantly young, people not only because they are *Islamic* but also because they are *new* and provide a basis for creating alternative space for social experimentation and efforts at social change. Second, we should approach social tensions and even conflicts associated with these groups as an interactive rather than one-way process, where the wider society is a party. Third, I argue in the strongest possible terms that while a connection between these tensions with wider society – and what is seen as an old order – and violence can be discovered it *should not be assumed to apply wherever such tensions are found.*

I make this argument on the basis of fifteen years of research on new religious movements, and five years on religion in Russia and the Northern Caucuses, some of which has been supported by the Religion and Society Programme, and published in a special journal issue of *Religion, State and Society* on 'Muslim Young People in Britain and Russia' on sale tonight.

To begin with my point about young people, the simple observation that in both the Northern Caucasus and in Britain 'radical' Muslim groups tend to attract young people, predominantly males, seeking solutions to their grievances and aspirations, tells us something important about their appeal. These 'New Muslims' who started to appear in the early 1990s came predominantly from the post-Soviet generation in a region beset by a near-collapsing economy, and suffering the repercussions of armed conflicts in neighboring Chechnya and tensions elsewhere in the Northern Caucasus. Compared to non-members, however, the New Muslims tended to be better educated and aspiring to take advantage of the new social, economic and political freedoms of the post-Soviet 1990s – yet at the same time shackled by clan-based and highly restrictive social relationships replete with bribery and tight subordination, not least of

younger people. The existing 'old' Islamic institutions in the region held little appeal for the young.

Communities of the New Muslims – the *jamaats* – on the other hand, provided a range of opportunities for these young people: in business (all members were employed), in social status (holding positions of responsibility in the *jamaats*), and in personal life (*jamaats* were drug and alcohol-free). Overall, I believe that in the earlier period (roughly until 2004), the 'radicalism' of these young people was contained rather than caused by their involvement in the *jamaats*.

What was new about the Islam of the New Muslims was its 'Salafi' orientation. It was radical in the sense that it provided authoritative justifications for challenging the existing social order. In an apparent paradox, the New Muslims' 'return' to what they saw as a pure, Salafi Islam was in many ways an attempt to *modernise* social practices and create an alternative social space for what they themselves would call 'halal life' and what I would call 'social experimentation'. (And please note that in the Northern Caucasus, Salafi Islam is not necessarily 'violent', and Sufism is not always 'peaceful'.)

As we know well from the existing literature, an emergence of any new religious group means a construction of new 'us' versus an existing 'them', and tensions are likely to occur. So the New Muslims refused to participate in many traditional activities that their parents and grandparents saw as central to their existence as a community. However, these tensions did not have to spill over into violence. Indeed, after 1998, the New Muslims' leaders became increasingly concerned about the movement's legitimacy and made efforts to oppose militant versions of Islamism, such as Takfiri ideas. Demographic changes were doing their work too: the New Muslims were growing older; many of them were getting families and accepting all the responsibilities that came with this. There was also increasing acceptance of the movement within the local community.

So what leads some from these largely peaceful reformist movements to become violent? Models developed to look at earlier New Religious Movements can still help us. One merit of these models is that they encourage us to reflect on how actions by both new groups and their *opponents*, including state agencies, can contribute to either escalating or aborting a spiral of violence. In the case of the New Muslims, there was an increasing polarization between the movement and its opponents, with each framing the other as 'false Muslims'. However, even this framing did not have to spill over into violence had not the labels applied to the New Muslims (like 'Salafi', 'Wahhabi' and 'Islamist') not become associated with violence in the region where terrorist groups had already been operating and attempting to co-opt New Muslims into their ranks. As a result, indiscriminate violence started to be used by law enforcement agencies to curb the movement (including torture, imprisonment without trial, desecration and closure of mosques). The local terrorist groups and Chechen rebels used this further to pressure the New Muslims to join a pan-Caucasian jihad against the Russian 'infidel' as the common enemy. In turn, the law enforcement agencies responded with ever escalating violence, driving the movement's leadership ever closer to joining the terrorist jihadists. And so it happened that some New Muslims became both the victims and perpetrators of violence.

While based on research in a different socio-political context to ours, my findings tally well with research in the British context which discovers a similar basis for the appeal of new Islamic beliefs and practices amongst young people seeking social experimentation and change. This work includes that done on the Religion and Society Programme by Laura McDonald, and the work of Lucy Michael, and, in Denmark, Lene Kuhle. As is the case with other new religions, such experimentation starts to be viewed with particular concern when it proposes more radical challenges to mainstream values, conventions and politics. However, what a liberal democracy can learn from the more politically restrictive environment of the Northern Caucasus is how treating people with radical and even anti-social views *who are nevertheless operating within the law* as potential terrorists can easily lead to real terrorists increasing their pool of recruits. Liberal democracy should use its rich repertoire of solutions capable of accommodating those who peacefully disagree with its foundations to cope with such young people, and by doing this make itself more appealing to them as they grow and mature. Sound academic research, which does not ignore the extensive research already carried out on new religious movements, nor established academic monitors like INFORM here in London (Information Network Focused on New Religious Movements) is indispensable for providing the accurate information on which these solutions can be based.