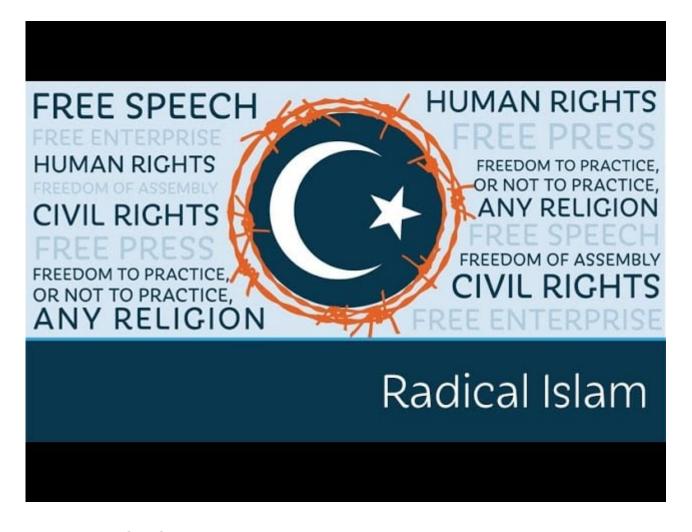# On "Islam" v. "Islamism"

by Lev Tsitrin

Bruce Bower's common sense, and the clarity with which he communicates his ideas just compel agreement. Yet, his taking to task a few folks for "using the weasel word "Islamism" instead of admitting that the problem is Islam" – as he did in an otherwise admirable piece on British Parliament's recent surrender to Moslem intimidation, "[In Britain, Another Step Toward the Abyss](#)" made me scratch my head – not least because I myself regularly use the term "Islamism."

Of course, I can see where Mr. Bower is coming from. Anyone who sees Islam as God-mandated will automatically treat the conduct that crosses it as blasphemous and unnatural, requiring correction (if needs be, by violence). Hence, for such people the word "Islam" suffices to explain both the

mindset, and the coercive action that results from it, and "Islamism" adds nothing to our understanding.

Which is perfectly true — but this mentality predominates only within certain geography — countries like Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan — and not every majority-Moslem countries' body politic treats Islam this way. As to the West, the notion that one's inherited creed is not merely a matter of history, culture, and group identity, but is God's actual blueprint for conduct is a thing of the long-gone past. Bloody wars that Europeans fought after the Reformation over the rightness of creed dissipated with the onset of Enlightenment which removed religion from the purview of governments, relegating it to voluntary, private observance. In the West, it is strictly your own, and no one else's business whether you fast on Ramadan or on Yom Kippur, whether you celebrate Easter or Passover. That religious observance should be compelled the way it is done by the ayatollahs or the Taliban is, to a Westerner, plainly bonkers, going counter not just to the common sense, but to legal norms (as codified in the First amendment to the US Constitution, for instance). In that, Western view, Islam is a yet another inherited creed — neither better nor worse than Christianity, or Judaism, or Hinduism, or Buddhism. It is a creed that has power only over the individuals who chose to espouse it — but not over the others, nor over the state. Islam is just one component of its adherents' culture — but to a westerner, the terms like "true" or "false" apply to Islam in the same way in which they apply to New York Yankees or the Boston Red Sox — that is, they cannot apply at all.

So if, to a Westerner, Islam is just another cultural artifact, how does he describe the alien (to him) attitude that is prevalent in certain Middle Eastern countries, that Islam constitutes God's will for mankind, and therefore must be adopted world-wide, either gradually, via demography (and by extension, democracy) — or imposed by violent jihadi

action? In order to differentiate between the Western and the Middle Eastern perspectives, someone came up with a word "Islamism" – likely mimicking Western designations of recent movements that also claimed to represent the ultimate Truth – Communism and Nazism.

This is a designation that is as good as any, the difference between "Islam" and "Islamism" reflecting the difference in mindsets. In the mind of someone who thinks that Islam is the manifestation of God's will, "Islam" and "Islamism" are indeed exactly the same, the change of a word making for a distinction without a difference. But not so for a Westerner to whom "Islam" refers only to a cultural identity – a purely private matter – while "Islamism" represents an intolerable takeover by a particular religion of the public sphere.

This is where the contrast between "Islam" and "Islamism" comes into a sharp relief. For the new arrivals from the Middle East, "Islamism" is merely Islam-mandated, natural need to proselytize until Islam fulfills its ultimate destiny of guiding both the public policy and the personal conduct. To the West's older inhabitants, the two things are totally different, "Islam" being something that is at best benign, at worst neutral, while "Islamism" constitutes a threat of civilizational catastrophe, of turning the free and therefore tolerant social order into the hell-hole of compulsion that is Taliban's Afghanistan or ayatollahs' Iran.

Perhaps it is best to compare the difference between "Islam" and "Islamist" to a tiger: it is a benign creature when caged in a zoo, and a terrifying one when roaming free. The very same people who on a weekend flock to a zoo to see a tiger, would stay at home shaking in fear behind bolted doors at the news that this tiger escaped, and roams around the streets. The tiger is the same tiger – but dominant rather than dominated.

That makes all the difference in the world. The West's post-

Enlightenment separation of church and state put the raging tiger of the righteous urge to impose one's "true faith" on others into a cage — but today, the Moslem newcomers flooding Europe find this restraint to be godless and perverse (and standing in the way of Islam's worldwide domination which they feel is its natural destiny).

Unfortunately, the West treats those people as hopelessly fanatical, with nothing that can be done to change their views. Not so — although taking a theological path to reforming jihadis by pointing out to them that the "true" Islam is actually a religion of peace which they "pervert" by following its "wrong," violent incarnation is indeed a fool's errand. But where theology fails, a branch of philosophy that is called "epistemology" comes to the rescue — by supplying one key, indisputable fact: it is impossible for anyone to know whether God talked to Mohammed. Out of the billions of Moslems, not a single one has (or ever had) the ability to know whether Mohammed was a prophet — a firm fact that has a fascinating religious consequence: it turns those who unequivocally insist that he was, without adding a qualifier "or not," into idol-worshipers. The likes of the ayatollahs and the talibaners worship a god of their own making. Their "knowledge" of what they claim to be theological "truth" is built atop the non-existent ability to know — the proverbial castle in the air, albeit of a religious kind.

Thus, the difference between Islamism and Islam boils down to a difference between the inherited tradition and faith on one hand, and gross idolatry on the other. These are two totally different attitudes towards a creed — the former properly acknowledging the severe limitations God placed on human knowledge, the other arrogating the ability to know which by our very nature we don't have.

So I would argue that "Islamism" is not some redundant, "weasel" word used as a proactive cover against accusations of "Islamophobia." It denotes the idolatrous and illegitimate use

of Islam, as distinct from seeing Islam as a historical and cultural phenomenon. It describes a tiger that roams around, threatening all, as distinct from the one that is caged, and can be approached with curiosity rather than fear. With due respect to Bruce Bower, the difference between the two is huge.

Lev Tsitrin is the author of "[The Pitfall Of Truth: Holy War, Its Rationale And Folly](#)"