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EDITORIAL

Moderate Muslims reclaim their faith

By The Editorial Board DECEMBER 11, 2015

HILLARY CLINTON takes political correctness too far when she refuses to characterize the fight against terrorism as a battle to defeat “radical Islam.” To use that term, she has argued, “sounds like we are declaring war against a religion.”

Such linguistic sensitivity may be well intentioned — especially given Donald Trump’s grotesque call to bar Muslims from entering the United States. But it does a disservice to the tens of millions of moderate, peaceful Muslims who abhor the extremism and violence of radical Islamists, and who want to highlight, not downplay, their rejection of the jihadists.

“If we’re to succeed in defeating terrorism, we must enlist Muslim communities as some of our strongest allies,” President Obama rightly stressed in his Oval Office address Sunday night. “That does not mean denying the fact that an extremist ideology has spread within some Muslim communities. It’s a real problem that Muslims must confront without excuse.”

Many Muslims would enthusiastically agree. Among them is the newly formed Muslim Reform Movement, launched this month by a coalition of moderate Muslims from Canada, Europe, and the United States. In a public manifesto, the coalition put the stakes bluntly: “We are in a battle for the soul of Islam, and an Islamic renewal must defeat the ideology of Islamism.” It explicitly condemned violent jihad, embraced equal rights for women and religious minorities, and insisted on separation of mosque and state. “We are loyal to the nations in which we live,” the reform declaration stated. “We reject the idea of the Islamic state. . . . We oppose institutionalized sharia.”

To underscore their opposition to Wahhabism, the harsh and puritanical version of Islam promoted by Saudi Arabia, members of the reform coalition posted a copy of their manifesto, Martin Luther-like, to the door of the Islamic Center of Washington, D.C., a mosque funded in part by the Saudi government.

Halfway around the globe, meanwhile, another organization of Muslim moderates is mounting a vigorous challenge to ISIS and jihadi extremism.

In Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim group has embarked on an international effort to repudiate the jihadist teachings and ideology of the Islamic State. The group is Nahdlatul Ulama, or NU, a 90-year-old Sunni social organization with 50 million members and a reputation for progressive pluralism. It recently kicked off a new anti-extremist campaign, a multipronged ideological drive, as The New York Times reported, to be “carried out online, and in hotel conference rooms and convention centers from North America to Europe to Asia.”

Last month, NU released a 90-minute film that vigorously refutes ISIS and its Wahhabist-rooted fundamentalism. The grisly massacres celebrated in so many jihadist videos are denounced in this film as an appalling perversion of Islam that the Muslim world must not tolerate. NU is also training Arabic-speaking students, both male and female, to disseminate its antiradical values and challenge Islamist supremacism.

It is a great mistake to blame the evils committed by jihadi extremists on the Muslim religion. Radical Islam — not Islam itself — is the menace that must be defeated. Ultimately, that defeat can only be administered by Muslims passionately committed to moderation and tolerance. Those moderate Muslims need all the support we can give them as they battle for the soul of their faith.

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