

Malcolm Turnbull's 'papal pronouncement' on Islam most welcome

Greg Sheridan, The Australian, January 20, 2016

Malcolm Turnbull in Washington this week issued the secular equivalent of a papal pronouncement to clear up a question of dogma.

There is, after all, a link between Islam and Islamist extremism.

In an important, balanced and sensible speech, the Prime Minister, in addressing the challenge of Islamic State (which he calls ISIL) and related terror groups, commented: "We should not be so delicate as to say ISIL and its ilk have got nothing to do with Islam."

Of course, and quite rightly, Mr Turnbull said the vast majority of Muslims should not be condemned for the actions of a very small minority of Muslims who are unrepresentative.

Nor should societies such as Australia and the US in any way at all turn against, isolate or embarrass their Muslim communities. These riders can all be expressed in different ways but they are critically important.

No one should doubt the good will or civic integrity of ordinary Muslims in Western societies. Mr Turnbull was right, too, to draw inspiration from opposition to any extremist interpretation of Islam from democratically elected leaders of majority Muslim nations such as President Joko Widodo of Indonesia.

Nonetheless, his comments are a commonsense repudiation of the absurd and Panglossian and nonsensical view that ASIO director-general Duncan Lewis, expressed a few weeks ago that there was no connection between Islam and extremism. In one sentence of an interview that was admittedly a little ambiguous in its structure, Mr Lewis even seemed to argue that merely to suggest any such link between Islam and extremism was "blasphemous".

The Lewis comments were bizarre in themselves, defied common sense and were widely seen in Coalition circles as an attempt to impose an absurd degree of political correctness on public discussion of Islam and extremism. This was reinforced by the revelation that Mr Lewis had rung Coalition politicians to urge them to follow his line on such matters.

The Lewis doctrine was in striking contrast to recent speeches and writings of British Prime Minister David Cameron who, while embracing British Muslims for their positive contributions to society, has increasingly challenged some cultural practices among some Muslim communities, especially regarding women's rights, and also rejected the paranoid and extremist elements of much contemporary Islamic political discourse, even when it explicitly rejects violence.

Mr Turnbull naturally did not canvass any of these issues in Washington this week, but his elegant formulation is nonetheless a liberating statement because it frees politicians, and everyone else, to discuss reality.

Whatever the sensitivity of these issues, the political system enters extremely dangerous territory when it forbids mainstream political leaders and parties from discussing obviously important issues honestly.

It is that sort of abdication by mainstream political leaders that leads to the rise of divisive populists such as Donald Trump.

No one could possibly accuse Mr Turnbull of fearmongering or alarmism, so his statement of the obvious will be widely accepted.

Doubtless, he would reject the idea that his comments are a repudiation of those of Mr Lewis.

Quite rightly, the Prime Minister mounted a vigorous defence of the ASIO boss, who, the one silly statement on Islam notwithstanding, is overall an outstanding Australian. But the plain meaning of Mr Turnbull's words is the opposite of the plain meaning of Mr Lewis's words.

The Prime Minister's comments also invite a respectful but honest discussion of what the linkages are between Islam and extremism, a discussion that liberal Muslims in Western societies are engaging with increasing frankness and honesty. His statements do not yet quite carry the doctrinal weight of a papal statement yet, on this occasion at least, they constitute the revised standard version and can be cited in all future doctrinal disputes.