

FECRIS/AVISO International Symposium
Sectarian deviations and the process of radicalisation, 19 May 2017

Speech of Véronique ROY, a French mother

I would like to start by thanking you for inviting me here today to give an account of the radicalisation of one of my sons, Quentin, who was converted in 2012, left to take up the Jihad in September 2014 and was reported dead in January 2016 at the age of just 23. There is nothing better than testimonials from people who have been through everything to help understand, repair and prevent this happening to others. His life and its tragic end, our unsuccessful attempt to stop him getting drowned, the family trauma and the fact that life goes on despite everything are told in my book "Quentin qu'ont-ils fait de toi?"

I didn't choose the title by chance. It is meant to show how Quentin slowly became someone else, under the influence of friends – it is often the case that radicalisation begins within a trusted circle of close friends. In our particular case, we saw Quentin go down the slippery road, from his individual religious calling to enlistment, guided by fanaticism and superstition, by malicious Muslim friends and under the influence of an ideology.

While two specific friends played a dominant role, we still find it difficult to actually put our fingers on any specific date. We didn't initially notice anything, or rather we didn't understand because we were not warned and not influenced by the current climate of suspicion and vigilance.

The first friend, a French Muslim with Algerian roots, a friend of Quentin's at the private Catholic school and who often came to our home, was the one who initiated him into Islam and into a quite literal interpretation of the Koran. Yes, he seemed to us to be very religious, quite retrograde, but it didn't worry us that much. Yes, he seemed quite fundamentalist, and would complain that he was unable to pray at university. He had a beard, but would always give me a kiss. He came to discuss things at our home. We thought that this intellectual jousting was good even if we didn't agree with what he said, that it was good to speak of spirituality and religion, of a vision of society with nothing better to do than debate marriage for all. He used to say to Quentin, "*You're lucky, you can speak out at home*". Too late, after Quentin had died, we learnt that he had conspiratorial and satanic leanings (music, comics, etc.) which must have influenced and frightened Quentin

The second was a neighbourhood friend since Quentin's teens, slightly older, a history student, also a French Muslim with Algerian roots. It was said that he became radicalised after returning from a trip to Mecca. He was reputed to have a certain aura, influencing young people, somewhat like a guru. In fact, he had quite a few converts. He showed no outward signs of fundamentalism (in fact, quite the opposite), and this deceived us. Too late, we learnt that he had been watched by the security forces (flagged "fiche S") since 2013 until his arrest in November 2015; that he had lost his job as CPE (a college education counsellor) due to praying at work. It was not until afterwards that other young people told us that he stuck to Quentin like a leech at the end, accompanying him to his circumcision, and to the airport on the day he departed. At the same time, he constantly lied to us, feigning not to know anything.

Young Muslim associations watched Quentin become radicalised, but didn't do anything, didn't say anything. As if this was part of the risk of practising the religion. I would have liked someone to have come and told me what was happening – me, a person who knew nothing about Islam. But as I now understand it, *"one does not judge a pious person, only God can judge" or "that has nothing to do with Islam"*.

Quentin himself remained, at least to start with, a pleasant member of our family, with lots of social contacts, showing no signs of violence. When he got annoyed he apologized, saying that his religion did not allow it. *"That is what the Jihad, the true Jihad, is all about, fighting one's passions, fighting the evil and good in oneself"!* We saw this as part of his personal development.

What I am telling you is the outcome of my experience, my investigations together with his father, testimonials from Quentin's friends, things deducted from the many discussions we had with him right up to the very end.

Sectarian deviation is a subject that worries me, as there are currently many hypotheses, including those put forward by Donia BOUZAR in France, on the sectarian methods used by the Islamic State and its recruiters. It's all very interesting. But, that said, has any way been found to de-radicalise people, a sort of "reverse brainwashing"? But it's not that simple.

In the case of such sectarian methods, we can consider that an individual's free will and the art of doubting have been erased. But when we look at the court rulings pertaining to radicalised young people, we see that judges sees them as being guilty

of having joined the Islamic State and thus 100% responsible for their deeds. This is the whole paradox. While I am not saying that they shouldn't be sentenced when they have committed an irreparable deed (often paid for by their death), can one be 100% responsible when one has been manipulated?

I would like to cite Aldous HUXLEY here: *"The victim of mind-manipulation does not know that he is a victim. To him the walls of his prison are invisible, and he believes himself to be free."*

The difficulty is that a young person who slides into violent Islamic radicalisation does not leave the country in handcuffs. He leaves seemingly of his own free will, voluntarily. Moreover, he is convinced he is doing the right thing. And all this makes him seem guilty. In most cases, radicalisation is a gradual and insidious process, slowly breaking down a person's resistance. Moreover, references to scholars and exegetes are numerous, and converts are taught that their path is prescribed in holy texts, by the prophet, in the name of God, that these texts cannot be disputed because they constitute the divine word.

The ideology on which everything is based shows in a reassuring way the road to take.

Even so-called moderate Muslims say that the texts are to be taken literally. But everything depends on their contextualisation, their interpretation. There are explicit verses, and verses which God alone can understand. In my opinion, this is one of the main problems: texts which, as they are vague, leave the door open to excessive interpretation – it is God speaking, the prophet said so, he did it. Enlightened Islam exists, but its opposite also exists. *"God will be our judge"*, the believers say.

Being a parent is very painful, especially when one sees that the recruiters did not leave the country to fight themselves, yet get light sentences compared to those they recruit; recruiting without leaving to fight is somehow proof of cowardice, hypocrisy and perversity, and I hope that court rulings will evolve to take account of this. The ensnaring recruiter, the Islamist ideologues who are not forbidden to speak, are very much responsible for the mental poison they spread.

- **But who was Quentin?**

A young and very handsome boy, a normal boy in a normal family, I would say. Our children were baptised as Catholics, but we left it up to them whether they actually practised. We brought them up open to the world and diversity.

Middle-class parents, running their own business. My husband, a Frenchman born in Haiti, from a well-off middle-class family, came to France at the age of 5 and is totally integrated. A brother, 4.5 years older and an engineer.

A life in the suburbs, Quentin lacked nothing, though was well aware of the meaning of effort, in line with strong family values.

Quentin was not an outperformer in his class, but nevertheless a good pupil, sociable though a bit shy, loved sports and music, played the piano, liked dancing, was good at making people laugh and had a nice girlfriend. By no means a delinquent's profile, a sufferer – often the standard image of Jihadists. Instead empathetic, very sensitive and obviously questioning the world, something quite normal for a young kid.

The future held a lot of promise - he had passed his Bac (“A” levels”) and was getting ready to study sport at university.

How can one explain that this young man – a man who organised a party in the year of his Bac to raise money in the wake of the Haitian earthquake by selling cakes – was to depart, 4 years later, for Syria in support of Muslims who, in his eyes, had a monopoly in suffering.

How had he progressed from “Islam as the religion of love” to “God is kind to everyone except those who attract his wrath, the disbelievers and polytheists” (including musicians, voters, those who practise yoga like me, for example)?

Who started this downward slide and when? We will never know. He is the only person who could tell us. These are the questions that haunt us. We cannot be held responsible, we are not deficient parents, as certain people would have you think. The ideology was stronger.

Could we have done more than we've already done?

Should we have been worried, rejecting his conversion, despite the fact that he was no longer a minor and that conversion is not a crime? Not back in 2012. In hindsight, in 2017, we would most probably find this a lot more disturbing.

There were changes and signs, but we didn't have the means to read them; today we understand a lot better.

We respected our child's freedom of religion and conscience, not seeing and understanding that he had fallen into a trap impossible to get out of.

How had Quentin changed? What signs were there of any sectarian deviation? Here are a few things we noticed.

In autumn 2012, he announced, full of joy and pride, his conversion to Islam, presenting it as a personal decision and choice: “nothing will change between us”, he said, “it’s between me and God”, “I love you”.

I still can’t associate his conversion with his radicalisation, for me this was like a train derailment, caused by bad encounters and the influence of texts, distancing him from a desire for spirituality, instilling him with fear and guilt; he was also impressed by Roqia, a form of Islamic healing, a session of which he attended.

An avid reader, Quentin justified his choice of Islam, saying that it was a modern religion in the chronological sense of the word, which recognised all the prophets; a religion compatible with science. This also gave rise to long philosophical discussions between the four of us – us parents tending to be believers, our elder son an atheist with a scientific background and speaking more of the Big Bang and evolution rather than divine creation, while Quentin saw signs of God everywhere.

(influence of Maurice Bucaille’s book *The Bible, the Quran and Science* (published in 1976) - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maurice_Bucaille)

Though we were surprised by his conversion, he reassured us. I did cry a bit though, as I would have liked him to have invited us to his conversion party; he did it with own mates - there is no such thing as baptism in Islam and a priori no accompaniment, something that I now regret.

Initially, there were no radical changes: he wore the same clothes, displayed the same behaviour, had no specific requirements, kept his girlfriend, his student job, carried on studying, taking part in sports competitions, in family life. But he did celebrate Ramadan, would only eat halal meat and stopped eating pork (something he used to love). He grew a small beard, something normal for a Muslim. He prayed five times a day in his room, and went to the mosque on Fridays. He spoke of meditation which did him good.

Our friends who knew him initially remarked that he had become more mature, that he was particularly calm and smiling.

But this turned out to be the tip of a treacherous iceberg!

In 2013, the first complications appeared, in hindsight understandable due to our knowledge of Salafism and its laws:

1. no more playing the piano, something hard for his musician father to accept. In order not to put our backs up, Quentin didn’t say that it was forbidden, but just “*it’s futile, it takes me away from God*”. What could we say?

2. April 2013: more disturbing was that he found it impossible to enter the church during the funeral of his paternal grandmother; he had gone away and we expected him to re-join us; his brother found him prostrate outside the church, in tears, unable to come in because "his religion forbade him to enter, due to the Holy Trinity, the images of the saints, etc."

This was obviously quite a scene, the first step towards separation, but we forgave him, his grief was sincere. We ascribed this to religious fundamentalism. While we were obviously not pleased, nothing worse seemed to be in the offing. We thought that he would soon tone down his religious practice. We were unaware that all his deeds were the remote-controlled orders of his religious friends. Quentin explained his reasons to his father. Afterwards, he went to the graveyard with us ... and life carried on as normal, almost!!!

3. A further episode in summer 2013: his cousin's marriage. here again, he got up to his old trick. About to enter the church, he pretended he had stomach ache, and went off to the chemists. That evening, he didn't dance, this time claiming he was tired from travelling.

The following day at the beach on the way back, he had a problem with putting on his swimming trunks and going for a swim with us; he kept his shorts and T-shirt on for modesty's sake – he who had always been so proud of his bronzed body!

4. We no longer saw his girlfriend, who previously often used to come and spend the night with him: Quentin told us that they had stopped going out with each other, but that they still saw each other. We felt sorry for her, but it's not for parents to interfere in their children's love affairs.

Much later, she told us that his fundamentalist friends had convinced him to stop seeing her because she was Haram, not allowed. At first, he had resisted, hesitated, had started seeing her again because he loved her. But then he had stopped, under the pressure of the group. But none of this happened in our presence. Quentin had arguments to reassure us.

5. In September 2013 while we were having some work done on the house, Quentin had problems with the fact that we had taken out a loan and therefore had to pay interest. In his religion, this was not done. This was a rule set by fundamentalist Salafists, as we were to learn later!

6. November 2013: My husband organised a concert with his brothers and sister in a jazz club in memory of his mother. Quentin did not come because of the

alcohol and the music. The next terrible cut! We were not at all happy and we told him so. But we didn't want to antagonise him, wanting above all to maintain contact with him. He saw the family as not belonging to this "place of perdition".

7. At Christmas 2013, Quentin decided to stop embracing his brother's girlfriend and all other women apart from his mother and grandmother, as "this was not done in his religion". His brother got worked up, telling him that he was wrong. But it was Christmas, and we didn't want to start a dispute. But nevertheless, this worried us further. Such a lack of openness! Such intolerance on his part!

Quentin said that he didn't want to join us for our Christmas dinner on 24 December, claiming that, as a Muslim, Christmas had nothing to do with him. We told him to stay, saying that it was not a case of going to church, but of taking part in a family meal. His father told him that the 24 December was originally the date of the feast of the winter solstice, and thus a Pagan and not a Christian feast. Quentin left to get advice, then came back saying "it's OK, I've got the necessary authorisation; I owe it to my father and mother". Was this true, or was it just a way of preventing our suspicions being awakened, of preventing us asking questions?

He refused to accept his Christmas present in front of everyone, but was happy to see his family and cousins spend the evening with us, though taking care not to touch any alcohol.

The next day, he was more disposed to talk with us, and we even spoke with one of my sisters about religious sects, about being careful not to fall for fanaticism and superstition. He listened.

8- January 2015: Family dinner with my parents.

Quentin joined us after work. I had prepared a meat and fish raclette, something everybody enjoyed; all of a sudden, he panicked when our elder son pulled out a bottle of champagne to celebrate the new year. As someone who didn't touch wine, and a Muslim as well, he couldn't stand sitting at the same table as someone who drank alcohol, a sinner. He told us he would come down again for the dessert, arguing that "letting someone drink alcohol while sitting next to him, although he knew it was bad for one's health was like letting a drug addict inject himself with heroin in his presence". As accustomed, we discussed this, tried to reason with him. And that evening, just to keep him at the table, we removed the wine!!!

→ Terrible blackmail. But Quentin soon returned to "normal", kind and attentive as usual. He constantly went from one extreme to the other, and this misled us, preventing us from seeing any greater danger.

→ *a sort of late adolescent angst mixed with a moralising, guilt-assigning and invasive religious fundamentalism?*

9- January 2014: He also quit university, claiming that he no longer knew whether he liked what he was studying, that he wanted to be independent and go out and earn money. We were not at all happy with this. We discussed it with him, telling him that he would find himself in difficulties, but what can you do? How can you stop a young 22-year-old from wanting to go out and work? He also told me jokingly that “celibacy was hard”, and that he wanted to marry and start a family. We told him he could go out with girls, that’s what boys did at his age. That he first had to find someone and that he could think about marriage later.

He also quit his student job at Decathlon. As we found out much later, this was because of the music in the stores and because there were no prayer breaks

He had never been idle, and he soon found another job in a Qamis boutique. We were not that pleased, as it was too confessional. To our great satisfaction, he quit a few months’ later, saying that the boss didn’t seem to be honest and “*that he had big plans for the future*”. “Ouf” was all we could say! He bought a nice suit and started working as an Uber driver, together with someone else, on behalf of an employer. He drove a nice car and seemed happy, but he had to work long hours.

→ *We thought that he was in the process of calming down, of getting back to “normal life”. Oh, we were so fatally wrong!*

→ *Throughout this period, I was looking for help, attending conferences on Islam and getting to know the different religious currents; violence wasn’t Quentin’s thing and I thought he was an adherent of Quietist Salafism, something not that bad, I thought. He replied that “I was just like all religious predecessors”. I asked the advice of a psychologist. Though unable to help me, he spoke of the possibility of a sectarian influence, telling me to do everything to maintain contact with him; I also requested the help of the main Paris mosque, but I had no precise details. All they said was “he’s ignorant, on edge, but it will soon pass by”. Quentin saw that I was trying to understand him, but for him what we had here was not true Islam, but French Islam*

10- He stopped working during Ramadan, didn’t want to go on holiday with us, saying that he would stay at home and look after the house. In September, he told us he wanted to learn Arabic and spoke of prestigious Egyptian universities; this was current practice (and legal), and a 1-month course cost €70, a sort of ERASMUS;

together with him, we got hold of the necessary information. But we ended up dissuading him because of the Arab Spring and the associated risks. He had no problem accepting this, and we talked to him about French universities where one could learn Arabic and how useful it would be to speak Arabic in international trade.

11- At the end of September 2014, he told us he had to do a quick round trip to Frankfurt to pick up a car for his employer.

He set off, sending a few messages saying that he was off to learn Arabic. We tried to call him, but his mobile phone was turned off. He never came back. We issued a missing person's declaration, and - too late - we discovered a Frankfurt-Istanbul plane ticket on his computer sent by a third party, his Uber partner, also now dead. At the end of October, we learned that he was in Syria thanks to the dialling code on a message.

In his voice message, Quentin apologised for not having informed of us of what he was doing, as that would have worried us. However, he was well, and had left France to help people. There were sobs in his voice and he hoped we would understand the truth he had gone to look for. He loved us.

He kept his promise, contacting us one month later from an Internet café, then at Christmas, and regularly via WhatsApp. The link was strong, there was a palpable feeling that he was missing us, but we also felt that disbelief was at work, with him inviting us "to read the Koran where you'll find the truth".

But this was all an illusion. Once they've gone, it's too late. The longer they stay, the more they get brainwashed, condemned to choose between disbelieving and what God demands of them, i.e. defending Muslims who are suffering.

He was clearly missing us, but he said "I know that you are suffering while I'm away. I'm also suffering, but it is a sacrifice that God demands of me". I could feel that he was suffering, ensnared, in two minds, but submissive.

He was sad, his face became empty – "how can loving God make you sad", I would say to him.

What type of a God is it who makes him leave his family to which he is so attached, and whose values he will never give up.

→ I understand now that his leaving was the beginning of the end, but at that time we were still in a state of shock, still wanting to save him and to get him to come back, as the police weren't going to go looking for him. Above all, we didn't want to brusque him, we kept on telling him how much we trusted and loved him. We also shared family memories.

However, as time passed, we slowly lost hold of him. The group pressure was even greater down there than here. They were never alone, they were not allowed to show any sign of weakness for the sake of group cohesion and security.

Even if he had wanted to, he would not have been able to back-pedal. He was caught, destined to die for the Cause, for God or for fleeing (this would have made him a traitor); he was undoubtedly afraid to come back to France, as prison was waiting for him here. He had known this since November 2014 and he told us: "I don't want to go to prison, I haven't done anything wrong".

He spoke to us in suras and verses, but we had no understanding of his religion and his religious references. We just spoke to him of love.

When I requested the main Paris mosque to help me reply in his words, to provoke a reaction from him, I got no answer.

In mid-November, after the Bataclan attacks, he told us: "I can understand that you are shocked". This gave us a bit of hope, but it was immediately quashed by him saying "but they are attacking us, we've got to counter-attack, so watch out". It was all terrible. They ordered him to flee, in vain. And then, no more news.

- In mid-January, an unknown person stating to be a friend of Quentin (or rather of "ABU Umar farensi" (the Frenchman)) sent us a WhatsApp message: "[salam](#) [alikhom](#) , the State built on the blood of martyrs " herewith announces that he has fallen in battle, a martyr in the land of the Caliphate and that his body has been devoured by green birds". He added: "read the Koran, that will make you feel better". He affirmed that "Islam is a religion of love and of submission by the sabre", "it is the religion of truth".

I recognised Quentin's handwriting in the attached letter; "If I receive it, it will be because he is dead", it said. That resembled a will: "if I die, please give all worldly goods to my brothers". Ironically, the one thing he owned was a Samsung tablet! And then this terrible undated text written for us, saying "that my parents know that I intend to die, for what is the good of living in a world of falsity and illusion; the truth is to be found in the Koran, and I hope that one day you will understand the Truth that I have gone to look for. We'll see each other again in Paradise".

That was the end. We had no proof, no body, no date, no certificate of death. He would have been 25 years' old today. A life thrown away! Yet, despite the violence in his words, he had loved, that's for sure. If he had hurt anyone (living in a war-torn country, he would very probably have had to fight), above all it would have been himself that he hurt. He had never shown us pictures of him carrying arms or

in violent videos. He was considered guilty of having left France to fight, he had joined the Islamic State.

His two friends mentioned above who drove him to the airport hadn't said anything, hadn't tried to stop him. One is now in prison awaiting sentencing for having taken part in a recruiting and logistics operation for Syria. Quentin had left with his Uber partner, now also dead, together with some ten other young people from our district – Sevrans, “a mini-Molenbeck”, the press said.

It is very difficult to trace his enlistment, his indoctrination which was both flagrant but also camouflaged. He seemed so convinced, so determined, persuaded to help.

The worst thing was when, one month after his departure, I rang up the French hotline “stop jihadisme”. On the basis of their questionnaire, they told me that “he was only 70% radicalised”. But he had still gone off to fight! Others are perhaps more radicalised, but don't go off. And that's the big difficulty and perhaps the danger.

Ex-jihadist David Vallat explains the process of radicalisation very well in his book “Terreur de jeunesse”, speaking of faith turned into exaltation:

“There I am, looking for the hidden meaning of life, and along comes someone with all the answers; ... I felt I was putting order back into my life, that Faith was encouraging me, supporting me; ... the Islamic movement has its own recipe for overcoming our gut fears: the figure of the martyr, offering his life in combat; ... for the Wahhabi Muslim Brothers, a disbeliever is nothing but a body needing to be eliminated”

Thank you for listening.

As I imagine you will now know, I have many questions associated with what I have gone through. I want to understand. And I have just one wish: that nobody else has to go through what we have been through.

But to achieve this, we need prevention, fighting the totalitarian, intolerant and death-bringing Wahhabi-Salafist ideology and having the courage to ban what is dangerous, to weaken or even ridicule the arrogant ideological recruiters, to have the ways and means to detect such movements and defend ourselves, and to learn the art of doubting, something which is completely erased in any sectarian deviation.

Véronique ROY.