

'Islamic Terrorism': How should Christians and the West respond?



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This is an abbreviated version of the full text of Rev Colin Chapman's paper, which is also available as part of this edition of Encounters.

On 1 March, 2005, the headline in *The Times* was 'The shoe bomber from a Gloucester grammar', and we read of the shock and dismay of the Muslim community in that city over the conviction of the quiet and earnest Saajid Badat in the Old Bailey for having conspired to blow up an airliner over the Atlantic in December 2001.

How should Christians and the West be responding to this new phenomenon that is called 'Islamic Terrorism'? We know how George Bush and the American administration launched their 'war on terror' in response to the attacks of 9/11, and how, having failed to catch Osama bin Laden in his mountain stronghold in Afghanistan or Pakistan, they turned their attention on Iraq, with the help of their only ally, Britain. We are no doubt very aware of the public debate that has been going on in the UK in recent weeks about the powers that the government believes it needs to detain suspected terrorists. If there is a wide spectrum of opinions about the war in Iraq and the threat of terrorism at home, we probably have to admit that Christians are probably almost as divided as the rest of our society over these issues.

Before examining these divisions, however, I want to make three points by way of introduction. Firstly, we need to be cautious about the expression 'Islamic terrorism', particularly about attaching the word 'Islamic' in a blanket way to every terrorist action carried out by Muslims. Journalists have referred to Pakistan's nuclear weapons as 'Islamic'. But they would never speak of America's nuclear weapons as 'Christian' or to Israel's as 'Jewish'. In the rest of this article, therefore, I will try to avoid using the term 'Islamic terrorism'.

Secondly, I want to declare at the outset my condemnation of terrorism of every kind in the strongest possible terms. The killing of innocent people through calculated acts of violence is repugnant and abhorrent, and *especially* when they are carried out in the name of religion.

Thirdly, we need to recognise that in many, if not most situations, terrorism is the angry and violent response of individuals or communities to violence that has been done to them. We were appalled and horrified by what happened in Beslan last September. But some commentators at the time saw this atrocity as a response to the brutalisation of Chechnya by the Russian army. Hizbullah was formed in Lebanon as a resistance movement in response to the Israeli invasion of 1982 and its continued occupation of southern Lebanon. Hamas was created in 1987 during the first Intifada in response to Israel's continued occupation of the West Bank and Gaza as an alternative to the more secular approach of Arafat and the PLO. They introduced suicide bombings after a Jewish settler, Baruch Goldstein, killed 29 worshipers at the Mosque in Hebron in February '94. What I am suggesting is that terrorism is not the root of the problem; it is usually a reaction to a perceived injustice, and therefore needs to be seen as a symptom of other underlying problems.

How then do we attempt to address the question? What we need to find out is: why did Islamists (radical or 'fundamentalist' Muslims) start resorting to terrorism, and why did they direct their terror against the West?

1. Major grievances and goals

The basic grievances of all Islamists can be listed as follows:

1. The weakness and humiliation of the Muslim world, which is seen as largely the result of Western imperialism in the 19th and 20th centuries. Justifying the attacks of 9/11 bin Laden said, 'Our nation has been tasting humiliation and contempt for more than 80 years'.
2. New forms of Western imperialism – political, military, economic and religious – which have taken the place of the old imperialism, but which are seen as more subtle and dangerous than the old.
3. The failure of the ideologies imported from the West – especially capitalism, communism/socialism and nationalism. These are perceived as 'bankrupt ideologies foisted on them from outside'. While *some* aspects of modernity are enthusiastically embraced, others are vigorously rejected.
4. The establishment of the Zionist state of Israel in the heartlands of Islam, carried out with the support of the West, especially by Britain and later by the US. One-sided American support for Israel since 1967, and especially since the 1980s enables Israel to hold on to the occupied territories. There is continuing, deep anger over the dispossession of the Palestinians in 1948-49 and the continuing illegal occupation of the West Bank.
5. The presence of foreign troops in Saudi Arabia since the early 1990s and the Gulf War. Sacred territory, containing the two most holy Islamic sites, is felt to have been invaded by infidels. Although American forces have now been withdrawn from Saudi Arabia, their presence in the Gulf and Iraq is seen as deeply offensive because Baghdad was 'the seat of the caliphate for half a millennium and the scene of some of the most glorious chapters of Islamic history'.
6. Corrupt and autocratic governments in Islamic countries which are not truly Islamic and are colluding with the West. For many Islamists the main target for their anger is their own governments.
7. Double standards. We are constantly reminded, for example, that the West will go to war to force Saddam Hussein to comply with a UN Security Council Resolution calling on him to withdraw from Kuwait, but will do nothing to force Israel to comply with similar UN Resolutions in 1967 requiring it to withdraw from occupied territory.

In summary: Islamism is the angry response of Muslims who are painfully aware of the decline of Islam and the resurgence of the West.

2. How do Muslims think about terrorism carried out by Muslims?

The events of 9/11 forced many Muslims to declare where they stood. From the reactions of people on the street and the public statements of scholars and leaders, we can see that there have been three different kinds of responses:

- a. *'These were genuinely Islamic actions carried out against the enemies of Islam in accordance with Islamic teaching.'*

One of the hijackers had written before his death: 'Remember the battle of the Prophet...against infidels, as he went on building the Islamic state.'

b. 'These actions cannot possibly be justified in terms of Islamic teaching.'

Dr Zaki Badawi of the Muslim College in London made this statement on the 13 September: 'Those who plan and carry out such acts are condemned by Islam, and the massacre of thousands, whoever perpetrated it, is a crime against God as well as humanity.'

c. 'We sympathise with their motives, but can neither support nor condemn their actions.'

Many Muslims on the streets have had some sympathy with the hijackers, but not total sympathy. Their reaction represents 'an uneasy balance between denial and approval'.

If these are the three main responses, is it possible to estimate what proportion of Muslims come into each category? My own very rough estimate would be that between 10 and 20% would identify with a. Between 30 and 40% would go with b., leaving between 40 and 60% with c.

3. Crucial theological questions for Muslims

How can a religion whose historical origins were associated with a considerable amount of violence present itself today as 'a religion of peace'? When Muslims today reflect on their scriptural sources and their history there are at least three questions that they have to address:

1. What are the different meanings of *jihad*?

The word *jihad*, which simply means 'struggle', that is struggle 'in the path of God', has become 'a defining concept or belief in Islam, a key element in what it means to be a believer and follower of God's will.

In recent years the more liberal Muslims in the West have frequently quoted one particular saying of the Prophet spoken when returning from a raid: 'We are returning today from the lesser *jihad* to the greater *jihad*.' The point that is made by these Muslims is that the *greater jihad* is the spiritual struggle against evil within, and the *lesser jihad* is the physical, military struggle. It is very understandable that many Muslims today quote this *hadith* and want to make this distinction. But Bernard Lewis is entirely justified in pointing out that 'For most of the fourteen centuries of recorded Muslim history, jihad was most commonly interpreted to mean armed struggle for the defence or advancement of Muslim power'.

2. Is *jihad* only defensive, or can it sometimes be offensive?

Some Qur'anic verses strongly condemn aggression: 'And fight (*qatilu*) for the Cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not be aggressive. Surely Allah does not like the aggressors...' (2:190 – 193). There are other verses in the Qur'an, however, which include very strong and clear calls to Muslims to fight. One of the best known is the so-called 'sword verse': 'Then, when the Sacred Months are over, kill the idolaters wherever you find them, take them [as captives], besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every point of observation. If they repent afterwards, perform the prayer and pay the alms, then release them ...' (9:5).

For many Islamists today jihad can be *both* offensive *and* defensive at the same time.

Thus bin Laden justifies his attacks on America in terms of self-defence: 'America and its allies are massacring us in Palestine, Chechnya, Kashmir and Iraq. The Muslims have the right to attack America in reprisal ... We ourselves are the target of killings, destruction, and atrocities. We are only defending ourselves. This is defensive jihad'.

3. Can suicide in *jihad* be regarded as martyrdom?

The belief that Muslims who die while engaged in *jihad* go immediately to Paradise is based on verses like these: 'And do not think that those who have been killed in the Way of Allah are dead; they are rather living with their Lord, well provided for' (3:169). 'Those who have emigrated and were driven from their homes, were persecuted for My sake, fought and were killed, I will forgive their sins and will admit them into Gardens, beneath which rivers flow, as a reward from Allah' (3:195; cf 3:157; 4:69, 100; 22:58; 47:5). Martyrs are greatly honoured in the community; their bodies are not washed and are buried in the clothes they were wearing at the time they were killed. Suicide, however, has always until recently been regarded by Muslims as a mortal sin, totally forbidden. One of the sayings of the Prophet is that 'Whoever kills himself with a blade will be tormented by that blade in the fires of hell'.

The dilemma facing Muslims, therefore, as they reflect on their struggles in the light of their scriptures is well summed up by Peter Riddell and Peter Cotterell: 'Is Islam a religion of peace, as Muslim moderates (and Tony Blair and George W. Bush) say, or is it a religion prone to violence and holy war, as statements by radical groups suggest? ... the answer lies not in an either/or response, but rather in a "both ... and" response. The Islamic sacred texts offer the potential for being interpreted in both ways. It depends on how individual Muslims wish to read them ...'. We might say that *both* the Islamists *and* the moderates are singing from the same sheet, but singing different tunes.

4. How should non-Muslims think about terrorism that is carried out by Muslims?

Here I think we have to acknowledge that non-Muslims, including Christians, are divided. At the risk of over-simplification, I think we can say that there are basically two different answers that are given:

Answer 1: *'We need to recognise that violence is an integral part of Islamic scripture and tradition, and that this is the fundamental problem for Muslims. The heart of the problem over terrorism has to do with Islamic theology more than political issues.'*

This can be contrasted with:

Answer 2: *'While understanding the ambiguity in Islamic scripture and tradition, we should accept the interpretation of mainstream Muslims that terrorism is forbidden and totally un-Islamic. We should also attempt to understand the anger of Muslims and acknowledge that in some cases they have good reasons for their anger.'*

In case you have not picked up that my sympathies are more with the second answer than the first, let me elaborate more on my own response.

5. A personal view

1. *While we condemn terrorism, we need to try to understand the minds of the terrorists.*

Part of my sadness over western responses to 9/11 is that the US in particular was so traumatised by these atrocities that, instead of trying to understand *why* they had happened, they put all their energies into 'the war on terror'. It takes time and effort to understand the history and politics, putting ourselves into the shoes of Islamists and trying to see the world as they see it. But it should be an essential part of our response. Understanding them, I suggest, does not necessarily mean agreeing with what they believe or approving what they do.

2. *We need to be more critical about our own history and the policies of our governments, willing to say with the Psalmist, 'We have sinned, even as our fathers did ...' (Psalm 106:6).*

All Brits living in the Middle East are reminded frequently that their government in 1917 declared its support in the Balfour Declaration for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. We know now that our government was making a different set of promises to the Arabs to enlist their support in driving the Turks out of Palestine and Syria. With the benefit of hindsight we would probably have to say that it was naïve of the British to think that the establishment of a Jewish homeland (or a Jewish state, which is what the Zionists had in mind) would not in any way prejudice the rights of the Palestinian Arabs. Many of the seeds of the present conflict in Iraq were sown by Winston Churchill and the British government in the solution that they imposed between 1920 and 1922 after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the first World War.

I personally believe that a serious attempt on the part of the West (and especially the USA) to understand the anger of Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims and to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a more even-handed way would go a long way – perhaps even a very long way – towards defusing the anger that many Muslims feel towards the West. If people in the West can separate the religious and the political issues, and if on reflection we can admit – at first to ourselves and then perhaps gradually to others – that at least *some* of the anger may have been justified, then it is possible for dialogue with the Islamists to begin.

If I had been in this country in February 2003, I would have joined in the protest against the war in Iraq on the streets of London. Behind the declared pretext of going to war – the removal of weapons of mass destruction – was a whole list of other aims that were not so publicly stated at the time: the removal of Saddam Hussein, the protection of oil supplies for the West, the support of Israel, the spread of democracy in the region and the reshaping of the whole region in accordance with American interests. Resorting to the doctrine of pre-emptive attack without the support of the United Nations has created a dangerous precedent, and I agree with Robin Cook and others that the war and the continuing occupation, far from stemming the tide of Islamic terrorism, have actually multiplied the number of terrorists who want to attack their own people and the West.

3. *We need to be able to ask the hard questions in challenging Muslims.*

Admitting our own shortcomings and our own share of responsibility for the past, however, is not the end of the story. We do not need to take *all* the criticisms from Muslims lying down or to be ashamed of *everything* in our imperial past. While accepting some, if not many, of the grievances of Muslims, there are a number of questions that we *can* ask – and perhaps *should* be asking in the right contexts. For example:

- What models can you point to of countries which in your opinion are genuinely Islamic states? Do any of these countries provide a model of what a modern Islamic state can and should be? Do they provide conclusive evidence that 'Islam is the answer'?
- How well do Islamic states or Islamic countries treat their Christian minorities?
- While blaming others, are you willing to accept *any* of the responsibility as your own? Are you always going to engage in 'the blame game' – blaming others for your own failures.
- Have you really tried to understand the West? With all your criticisms of the West have you actually understood how civil society functions, and how our democracies work? If you are critical of the freedoms we enjoy, do you recognise any of the benefits of these freedoms, and are you willing to admit that many of your own people would like to enjoy these same freedoms?
- If you are so critical of Western 'Christian' imperialism, are you willing to describe the expansion of Islam across the Middle East in its first century as imperialism? Is there any difference in principle between our western empires and the Saffavid, Mughal and Ottoman Empires?
- You have every right to be critical of the slave trade between West Africa and the West Indies. But Muslims practised slavery from the time of the Prophet and throughout most of their history. Are you willing to admit that Muslims were engaged in the slave trade in Africa centuries before westerners were involved?
- If you use democratic processes to gain power, will you safeguard them even after you have gained power?
- Do you accept that in many situations violence simply breeds further violence, and that something is needed to break the cycle of violence?
- Can you deny that in many countries like Saudi Arabia, Muslims have for centuries called Christians *kafirs*, unbelievers, and that while some verses in the Qur'an are positive towards Christians, Christians and the West are perceived by many Muslims on the street all over the Muslim world as infidels?

4. *We should be passionate about justice and injustice.*

Jesus said, 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness' (Matt 5:6). It is unfortunate, however, that we tend to think of righteousness in very personal, even pietistic terms, as something that only concerns me, my holiness and my relationship with God. But what if we were to read this Beatitude as 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after *justice*', remembering that *dikaosune* can mean both 'righteousness' and 'justice'. This is why the REB translates this verse as 'How blest are those who hunger and thirst to see right prevail!'

When Christians search the prophets and Revelation in order to find clues about how these prophecies are being fulfilled before our eyes in the Middle East, they do not seem to me to have picked up much of the fire of the prophets who were concerned about justice and were not just predicting the future but making moral judgements on their society and on the behaviour of the nations around them. Elijah predicted a famine; but he also condemned Ahab for murdering Naboth and stealing his vineyard. I find it a very painful experience to visit the West Bank today because there are dozens – or rather hundreds – of Naboth's vineyards: illegal Israeli settlements on every other hill top.

Alongside our struggle for personal holiness, being salt and light in the world must mean fighting injustice wherever we find it.

5. *We need to recognise that there is a battle for the minds of Muslims*

Peter Riddell and Peter Cotterell say that 'there is a titanic struggle taking place between moderates and radicals for the hearts and minds of the Muslim masses in the middle ...'. Gilles Kepel makes the same point in the title of his most recent book, *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West*. And John Esposito speaks of 'the struggle for the soul of Islam going on today'.

Unfortunately it is not always easy to engage in dialogue with convinced Islamists. Perhaps therefore one of the things we need to pray for is that while our governments in the West protect themselves against terrorism and at the same time try to address the root cause of terrorism, moderate Muslims all over the world will be able to engage with Islamists, pointing to alternative and genuinely Islamic models of how to change the world.

Many Christians know 1 Peter 3:15: 'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have.' And if in our discipleship we have been taught how to answer questions about our *faith*, we may now need more training in how to answer questions from Muslims about history and politics. We may also need to listen to 1 Peter 2:15, where Peter says, 'it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.' The ultimate challenge for Christians is to work out how, in the words of Paul, not to 'be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good' (Rom 12:21).

The full version of this paper includes references and bibliography.

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