Comment

Islamist terrorism

Islam is a religion of peace, they say. 'Islamist terrorism', then, is a perversion of Muslim tradition.

Well, perhaps. The word 'Islam' means 'submission, resigning oneself to God'. That may or may not bring 'peace'. Historically, Islam looks remarkably like a warlike unitary state out to conquer the world. Historically, also, *jihad* has meant war against unbelievers, not personal inner struggle with temptations to infidelity. The Prophet died, in the year 632 by the Christian calendar, as a highly successful war leader, by then in control of most of what we call the Arabian peninsula and planning to take arms against Syria. The Caliph, the Prophet's 'successor' (Arabic *kalifa*), whoever he may be, is the civil as well as the religious ruler of the community of believers.

The Qur'an certainly says that there shall be 'no compulsion in religion', yet it has always been a holy duty to extend the borders of the House of Islam against the demonic world of unbelievers. Moreover, there should be no desecration of territory sacred to Muslims — which is why Osama bin Laden's principal demand is for the withdrawal of all infidels from Saudi Arabia. The purpose of all the terrorism, 9/11 in New York and Washington, and 7/7 in London, and the many other atrocities, is to force the departure of non-Muslims, and specifically of Jews and Christians, from sacred Muslim lands.

It sounds mad. It would make better sense to our western minds if the purpose were simply to retain control over Middle East oil reserves. It looks, after all, to put it crudely, as if American interest in stability in that region has a lot to do with ensuring the supply of the petroleum on which western civilisation depends. Does anyone believe that, if America was self-sufficient in oil, or Iraq produced peanuts, the US would be building vast new military bases there? But this approach in terms of *realpolitik* evidently makes no sense to the partisans of al-Qaeda.

Al-Qaeda's ideology stems from Wahhabism, the revivalist movement, founded by Muhammad Ibn'Abd al-Wahhab in 1744, calling for a return to a purer form of Islam closer to the ideals of the Prophet. Allied with the military power of the imperial House of Saud, Wahhabist ideologues ruthlessly eliminated all

© The Author 2005. Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2005, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00111.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

'apostates' – whether Sunni, Shi'ite or Sufi – who did not meet their standards of religious purity.

Wahhabism tolerates no dissent. In particular, of the four traditional sources of authority in Islam: the Qur'an, the *hadith* (the sayings of the Prophet), the *ijma*' (the principle of consensus) and *qiyas* (analogy), Wahhabism rejects the last two. Communal discernment is rejected, since the existing social order is too corrupt. Analogical thinking, as a way of dealing with new events by reasoning from past experience, is equally 'liberal'. Wahhabism reduces Islam to a scriptural literalism, an absolutism utterly closed against any kind of development that might bring it into harmony with modern conditions.

The Indian Muslim Abu Ala Maududi (1903–1979) condemned all modern Muslim communities for abandoning the Arabic language and Islamic law. Muslim governments that did not implement the *shari'ah* were apostate. Indeed, true Muslims should wage *jihad* against such regimes. Most blatantly, in 1926, the Turkish Republic, by adopting the Swiss civil code and the Italian penal code, thereby committed the worst apostasy imaginable.

Maududi was a decisive influence on Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), an Egyptian and the chief ideologue of this radical tradition. Following the attempt on President Nasser's life in 1954 large numbers of radicals, including Qutb, were jailed. In 1964, Qutb, having suffered a decade of torture in Nasser's prisons, published his best known work, *Milestones*, a work that has inspired some of this extreme form of Islamic revivalism. One of the central concepts of the book, *jahiliyya* (pagan ignorance and rebellion against God), owes something to Qutb's sojourn in the United States from 1948 until 1950, an experience in cross-cultural living that did not go well. Then employed in the Egyptian Ministry of Education, Qutb had been sent to study American educational institutions. He was deeply offended by the racism he observed and allegedly experienced. He was scandalised by the friendliness between the sexes. A Sunday night 'sock hop', put on by a youth group in a church in Colorado, to which he was invited, was too much for this lifelong bachelor. On his return to Egypt, his increasing radicalisation led him to join the Muslim Brotherhood. In the book he glorifies *tawhid* — the thesis that only Islam encapsulates God. He proclaims *jihad* on apostates and unbelievers alike, both of whom he accuses of subverting Islam. He lifts medieval Muslim limits on warfare by permitting, and recommending, what we would call 'suicide bombing', in the quest for the restoration of the Caliphate.

Recruits to the cause are not, as we know, the uneducated and unemployable poor, who might have good reason for resentment against western societies. Rather, they are highly intelligent and educated young men, with everything to live for, as it seems to us. The rage against western society, for which some are willing to kill

© The Author 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00111.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

and to die, is rooted in a much more radical rage against apostasy within Islam — corrupted, so it seems to them, by far too many Muslim compromises with the unbelievers, in Israel and in the Christian West.

The so-called 'war on terror' is not going to overcome this Islamic radicalism. Of course we have to do what we can. Bringing British standards of justice to bear on suicide bombers is no doubt what the vast majority of Muslims in the United Kingdom desire. There can be no accommodation with an ideology that is barely intelligible to most people in the West. Muslims, with good reason, may be reluctant to embrace Western 'values', uncritically — as devout Jews and Christians should also be. However, the rationale of the suicide bombings lies in a radical theology, which is far from obviously a deviation from traditional Islamic aspirations. Islam needs to undertake a critique of its past, by recovering traditions that Wahhabism denies. It needs to restore the authority of communal consensus and that of analogical argument to allow Muslims to develop along with – rather than against – the rest of the world, pagan, Jewish and Christian. But suggesting that 'Islam' needs to change is like saying that 'Christianity' needs to change — it's all too vague, it would take centuries, where would one even make a start? Come to think of it, with our past, shouldn't we Christians be well placed to develop some understanding of what it is going to take? And even to begin to see practical steps, in the way forward? Or, anyway, at least to entertain no illusions about how long and hard the way will be?

Fergus Kerr OP

© The Author 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00111.x Published online by Cambridge University Press