

Is Islam Inherently Violent?

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WASHINGTON – A number of recent opinion polls indicate that Americans on the whole distrust Muslims and that they believe that there is a violent, intolerant ingredient that is essentially an integral component of this faith. Most recently, a majority of Americans polled indicated that Muslim organizations should not build a cultural center and mosque very close to the site where the Twin Towers stood in New York City. While large numbers recognize the American constitutional right to worship freely and build a place for prayer where one pleases, it is considered inappropriate to have an Islamic center so close to where thousands of Americans were murdered by Islamic radicals. So, Islam, notwithstanding official efforts aimed at reaffirming American tolerance, is not particularly welcome in the land that prides itself for being the home of religious freedom for all. How so? Let's try a bit of reconstruction.

Conciliation after 9/11

In the immediate aftermath of the al Qaeda 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush made the effort to reassure Americans of Muslim faith and Muslims in general that the US Government had no issue with them. The problem was with the radical fringes that had hijacked Islam to justify an ideology of indiscriminate violence against us, their perceived enemies. The problem was (and ostensibly still is) with the radical groups –and not with the Muslim Faith as such.

The reality of conflict

In the intervening years, a deliberate attempt was made to uphold this distinction, for the benefit of all, Muslims and

Christians. The objective was to reassure Muslims so that they would not feel persecuted, while explaining to Americans that we were after specific groups of dangerous extremists and not after Muslims in general. The trouble is that, official statements and rhetoric notwithstanding, the only thing that was and is truly visible for the public at large –Muslims and Christians alike– is America’s direct military engagement in two Muslim states: first Afghanistan and then Iraq, with thousands of soldiers killed and ten of thousands wounded and mutilated by insurgents and road side bombs. So, Muslims felt under attack, with consequent negative reactions against the US; Americans saw their own people getting killed by Muslims. The fine distinctions between moderate and radical Islam were and are lost on both sides.

Barack Obama proposes more dialogue

With Barack Obama as President in 2009 there was an attempt to create a friendlier climate with the Muslim world. And so Obama floated conciliatory proposals to Muslim countries all based on dialogue and respect during the 2008 campaign. At the time, the political objective was to create a contrast between himself and the more belligerent George W. Bush who, reassuring words to Muslims notwithstanding, had been the Commander in Chief who ordered Islamic countries invaded and thousands of Muslims killed.

Cairo Speech

Then we had the much publicized Cairo Speech to the Muslim world, (Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt, June 4, 2009), delivered by President Obama. But all this friendly build up, delivered by a half African US President with a distinctively non Christian name apparently was not enough to create the hoped for turn around resulting in warmer relations between Americans and Muslims. While we are winding down the military effort in Iraq, the engagement is still there. In a separate theatre, Afghanistan, we are actually ramping up,

with expanding engagements in Pakistan and now Yemen, not to mention the widely perceived pro-Israel bias in all matters, first and foremost the issue of Palestinian statehood. Given all this, America's popularity among Muslims world wide has not risen much. Not many would say that today, because of Obama's new tone, America is definitely a friend of Islam.

Americans consider Muslims hostile

And Americans, almost two years into Obama's presidency, what are they thinking now about Muslims, at home and abroad? Well, it would appear that the attempts to draw a clear distinctions between the religion and most believers on the one hand (mostly good) and the fringes of fanatics, (very bad), while understood and upheld by the US intellectual elites, has not been grasped and embraced by public opinion at large.

As indicated above, various American opinion polls show a general distrust of Muslims, down to harboring doubts as to whether they can be loyal US citizens. In all this, Barack Obama who won the Nobel Peace Prize last year on account of his emphasis on dialogue is not helped much politically by the bizarre belief held by sizable minorities in America, (between 18 and 20 per cent in various opinion polls), whereby he himself is thought to be a Muslim. And certainly, this mischaracterization, however totally unfounded, is not meant as a compliment. *"Muslims bad. Obama Muslim. Obama, oh well, bad"*.

The new conventional wisdom: Islam is inherently violent

But in all this, what I find fascinating is the increasingly accepted new conventional wisdom whereby Islam as such –no distinction between majorities and radical fringes– is an "inherently violent" religion bent on holy war against people of other faiths. At the same time, it is widely believed that most, if not all, Muslims –whether they partake in violent acts or not– generally rejoice when Christians or others are

targeted by radicals.

Going back to the famous Sam Huntington's theory, according to this thinking, there is indeed a "*Clash of Civilizations*" that makes the Muslim world writ large into an existential threat for Western, (mostly Christian), Civilization. If this were indeed so, then conflict with Islam is inevitable. It may flare up more or less according to historic circumstances, but it is "in there".

According to this tenet, real, lasting peace with the Islamic world is as fanciful as real peace with committed Russian Bolsheviks in the aftermath of the October Revolution. There is no peace with mortal enemies who see it as their most sacred duty to eventually destroy all of us. We are at peace with Russia now; but only in as much Russia abolished the Soviet regime and abandoned its hostile ideology.

Exaggeration, only marginally correct

I do believe that, as in any exaggeration, there is some truth in this dire characterization. But only some truth and it rests in the unassailable fact that ***Islam, just as other religions***, has been used as a justification for violent undertakings many times in human history.

More to the point, there is something in the idea that large segments within traditional Muslim societies, seeking orientation in a modern world in which they are at a historic disadvantage in terms of technical resources, scientific knowledge, capital and management skills, sought solace in reverting to religious orthodoxy, including fanaticism. Religion, with all its clear cut revealed truths, can become a source of strength for disoriented societies seeking a moral compass.

Religious orthodoxy is reassuring

Blind, rigid adherence to one's own faith then becomes –at

least for some— reassurance. And beyond that, a faith that could be construed to contemplate enemies, enemies that we could reasonably view as oppressors and responsible for whatever underachievement we decry, is a good tonic. It boosts morale. *“We are essentially good. Our unsatisfactory present conditions are due to the nefarious behavior and sinister plots concocted by our enemies. The bad guys are outside. They want to get us. And so it is our moral imperative, our sacred duty, to destroy them first”*. And so it goes.

But my point is that the surge of fanaticism, while empirically observable, has not been embraced by the majority of Muslims. So, we cannot say that the evidence that are some fanatics and others cheering them indicates that the bulk of islam has become militant.

Fanaticism in Islam and in Christianity

We know about the radicalization of many Muslims in recent times. Hence al Qaeda, all its affiliates and copy cats around the world. But I am not at all sure that a violent bent is the recognizable imprint of Islam as such. Different Islamic societies have been belligerent and have been at peace in different times. To characterize the entire faith and all of its adherents as zealots prone to violence is clearly an exaggeration not validated by the historic record.

(Of course, a different but quite relevant issue is whether or not —today—the so called “moderate” Muslims are truly and honestly committed to isolate and suffocate the virus of radicalism in their midst. And this is a real problem with no clear answer. Many assert that Muslim reluctance to forcefully condemn violence is an indication that deep down they are all in agreement. A strong view in the West claims that, while only some Muslism resort to violence, most of the others approve of it. And so, they are essentially all biased against us. More on this later).

History points to significant similarities

But, even if we could stipulate that Muslims are inherently violent, can we correctly juxtapose a peaceful Christianity forced into battle by a hostile Islam? Indeed, if we use the same yardstick that we want to use to measure religion inspired violence in Islam to the history of Christianity, are we really all that different? I'm afraid not. *It is true that broadly speaking we can say that **today** one does not detect large segments within Christian societies mobilized to commit religiously inspired violent acts.*

But this peaceful evolution is quite recent. So, while it is true that nowadays Christian societies are in general more peaceful, it is equally true that they evolved to this stage from a very long history of violence. And this evolution occurred without modifying the old Christian dogma. Which is to say that for many centuries violence prone Christians used to justify their actions on the basis of the same Scriptures upheld today by their mellow, peace loving descendents. The Scriptures did not change, the state of mind of the believers did –and with that the interpretation given to Scriptures was modified to go with the new, more peaceful state of mind.

From this we get that what changes is people's interpretation of dogma, following other social and cultural transformations. While we recognize that Muslim societies today on the whole are less tolerant than their Christian counterparts, we can hope that the same evolutionary process that made Christianity progressively more peaceful will apply to Islam as well. As for Christianity's really bloody past, in case we forgot, let's briefly summarize it.

Early Christianity, quite violent

Whatever the teachings of Christ, whatever the broad message of love within the Scriptures, the history of Christianity is largely, (albeit not exclusively), a history of violence among

Christians and against non Christians that goes all the way to modernity, culminating in two world wars waged by Christians against other Christians.

After centuries of persecution and martyrdom, in the III Century the Christians were accepted and emerged as the new sustaining force of the late Roman Empire.

Legend has it that Emperor Constantin converted after a revealing dream in which he was told that he would win a mighty battle if he adopted the Holy Cross. (*"In Hoc Signo Vincas"*, "In This Sign [the Cross] You Shall Win"). The story says that the Emperor ordered the Sign of the Cross to be painted or stiched everywhere and that he won the battle. Thereafter, Christianized Roman soldiers marched into battle with the motto *"Nobiscum Deus"*, "God is with Us". So, the concept of the righteous fight, the good fight blessed by God, is pretty old stuff in Christianity. Nazi soldiers had it on their belt buckles: *Gott Mit Uns*.

And European history is mainly a history of warfare among Christians. They all went to Mass to invoke God's blessings for soldiers who would kill and be killed by other soldiers blessed like them only by other priests in other churches. All this was done, by all parties, in the Name of God. The Crusades, the complex expeditions aimed at regaining Christian control over the Holy Sites were essentially religious wars aimed at accomplishing what was defined as a divine imperative. When the Crusaders conquered Jerusalem they piously slaughtered the entire Muslim population.

Christians slaughtering other Christians

And when Western Christianity broke into opposing camps after the Protestant Reformation, violence among opposing Christian factions became blind ferocity. The 30 Years War practically destroyed Europe –and Germany most of all. Violence, savagery and persecution were routinely visited upon

Christian religious sects by Catholics and vice versa by Protestants against Catholics.

The Catholic "Counter Reformation"

The Catholic Church reacted against the Protestant threat by upholding and forcing the strictest adherence to orthodoxy via the so called "Counter Reformation". This was a brand of uncompromising fundamentalism that would make contemporary Iranian Ayatollahs blush. In Europe, religious tribunals were routine. The charge of heresy was serious business as it would lead to death, in most cases after the most vicious torture. The "Spanish Inquisition", the religious courts that put countless people to death on charges of heresy is not just a matter of legend or a funny subject for Monty Python TV comedy sketches. It was an awful period in the history of civilization.

Intolerance and religious persecution

For centuries, in theoretically pious and loving Christian Europe freedom of thought and freedom of expression were unthinkable and in fact sinful by definition. In 1559 the Catholic Church started compiling, (and updated throughout the centuries), an "*Index Librorum Prohibitorum*", "Index of Forbidden Books". To legally publish a book, an author needed to receive an "*imprimatur*", "let it be printed" authorization by the local ecclesiastical authority.

Sure enough, while it built hospitals and schools and other charitable institutions, the Catholic Church became predominantly a force of genuine reaction for centuries, opposing modernity in any form, including science and technology. This long period was labeled by later critics as the era of "*oscurantismo*", the age of "darkness". And this tendency, while progressively less relevant over the centuries, given the increased secularism within many societies, lasted well into modernity.

Believe it or not, the last version of the the Vatican issued Index of Forbidden Books, incredibly, was compiled by the Roman Catholic Church in 1948, while the Index itself was abolished only in 1966, practically yesterday, by order of Pope Paul VI. (The legacy of this era is so resilient that in Italy there is still today the colloquial expression "*mettere all'indice*", "to place in the index", as a way to recommend the exclusion from society of people or subjects so totally dangerous or unpalatable that they should have no legitimate place anywhere).

Protestants also intolerant

And the Protestants, while on the whole more tolerant of other faiths, (witness the refuge offered by the Protestant Dutch to Jews escaping from persecution in Catholic Spain), killed and slaughtered Catholics and other Protestants just as cheerfully during the religious wars. Calvin's Geneva was certainly not a care free city where people could act as they pleased. There were rigid norms of probity. Sinners were publicly shamed and punished. The brutality associated with this administration of justice was not that different from what we may witness in contemporary examples of places administered via Sharia law.

America different; but still flawed

Americans may have a more benign vision of a tolerant Christianity because this Republic was founded on basic religious freedom by people who in some measure came here to escape from religious persecution. Hence the principles of freedom of worship for all, of the separation between state and religion, with no religious denomination enjoying special privileges at the expense of any other. But let's keep in mind that it was tolerance among a variety of Christian denominations. It did not deal much with other religions, as they were not there, (except for Jews who were not particularly welcome). Still the system on the whole worked well. Except, of course, for slavery.

The stain of slavery

The notion that loving Christians, as most slave owners professed to be, would see no contradiction between the principles of their faith and the practice of slavery is truly baffling. And to fight slavery the mighty American Civil War became in some measure a modern religious war. The North after all believed that it was on the side of God, as the lyrics of *"The Battle Hymn of the Republic"* attest. But ostensibly non-Christian behavior remained the norm in the very Christian South even after the defeat of their cause in the Civil War.

Segregation

The whole long and unhappy "reconstruction" period with all its segregation laws, intimidation against Black would-be voters and the subsequent surge of the KKK, lynching, violence and routine intimidation against Blacks was another demonstration of blatant injustice visited on Black people by Southern States whose leaders in most cases professed to be very good Christians. Apparently they saw no problem reconciling the principles of their faith and their laws, policies and brutal behavior.

We had to wait until the 1960s

Needless to say, we had to wait until the end of the 1960s –not so long ago–to see at least the formal abolition of racial discrimination as a matter of legally binding principle in America. In practice, discrimination in some fashion lingers, perpetuated mostly by good Christians who still do not see a contradiction between their faith and the racial prejudice they harbor.

So plenty of violent –ostensibly non-Christian– behavior in the history of this mostly Christian land of tolerance created with the primary purpose of defending the individual rights of all human beings, as these rights, according to The Declaration of Independence, are given by God.

European colonialism

Back to Europe, let us not forget the violent conquest and subjugation of most of the world by the Very Christian Monarchs, starting in the XVI Century and continuing until there was any scrap of real estate left to grab. And this included the pillaging of South America, the submission of India, the imposition of the opium trade to China, the complete take over of Africa, and so on.

World Wars and religious symbolism: "God with Us"

Regarding the modern slaughters of WWI and WWII in which millions of Christians were killed by other Christians, German soldiers in WWI had the inscription "*Gott Mit Uns*", "God with US" on their helmets. This inspiring motto stayed on and was carried by Hitler's armed forces in WWII. Nazi Germany's Wehrmacht soldiers had "*Gott mit Uns*" inscribed on their belt buckles during the conquest of Europe, thus creating the nice idea that the whole war of aggression was somehow blessed by God. While the actual Christian faith of the Nazis leaders is debatable, they certainly did not want to remove this notion of a divine blessing for their military undertakings, something that they could have easily done, given their complete control over the entire German state and society.

The Allied Forces engaged in a "crusade"

If we look at the other side of the divide, the Allied Forces wanted to create the belief that they were fighting a "*bellum justum*", a "just war", according to recognized Christian established doctrine. At the 1941 Placentia Bay meeting that led to the drafting of the Atlantic Charter, FDR and Churchill, while on board of the British cruiser HMS Prince of Wales, joined their British and Americans crews as they sang together "*Onward Christian Soldiers*", a famous religious hymn. As Winston Churchill himself put it later on to explain why he personally chose that hymn:

*"We sang **"Onward, Christian Soldiers"** indeed, and I felt that this was no vain presumption, but that we had the right to feel that we were serving a cause for the sake of which a trumpet has sounded from on high. When I looked upon that densely packed congregation of fighting men of the same language, of the same faith, of the same fundamental laws, of the same ideals ... it swept across me that here was the only hope, but also the sure hope, of saving the world from measureless degradation".*

So, in the words of a key architect of the war, this was not just a mighty conflict; but **"a cause for the sake of which a trumpet has sounded from on high"**, in other words a war that fit very well within the long history of divinely inspired and blessed religious wars.

We may regret that many Muslims have yet to embrace a more peaceful and tolerant approach to relations with others, both within their societies and outside of them. Still, let's not forget that Christianity got to to this goal only very, very recently.