

Acknowledgement

This is a revised version of the first of the
2005 Redcliffe Lectures in World Christianity,
given at Redcliffe College, Gloucester, on 14 March, 2005

‘ISLAMIC TERRORISM’: HOW SHOULD CHRISTIANS AND THE WEST RESPOND?

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9/11 was a defining moment for the West – and particularly for the US – in its relations with the Muslim world. In response to the attacks on New York and Washington, George Bush and the American administration launched their ‘war on terror’. When they failed to catch Osama bin Laden in his mountain stronghold in Afghanistan, they invaded and occupied Iraq, with the help of their only ally, Britain ().

7/7 – the attacks on the underground and a bus in London on 7 July, 2005, has proved to be a similar defining moment for Britain, starting a heated debate and forcing the government and the public – and especially Muslims and Christians – to declare how they respond to the new phenomenon of terrorism directed against the West.

With all that has happened since 9/11, and especially the ongoing conflict in Iraq, it may seem that it’s a bit late in the day to be asking how Christians and the West should have responded. Many feel that the West has already made several major mistakes. But if we can work out where we may have gone wrong, there should still be time to find more effective ways forward.

But *do* Christians, and *should* Christians have a distinctive approach to these questions? It could be argued that Christians in the West have a special role to play as interpreters, peace-makers and bridge-builders. They ought on the one hand to be able to interpret western society to Muslims - even if they are not totally in sympathy with it. On the other hand, because of the significant areas of common ground with Muslim beliefs (like the desire to see the kingdom of God come in the world), they ought to be able to interpret the Muslim mind and experience to westerners – once again, even when they are not totally in sympathy with it.

This lecture expresses the personal opinion of a Christian who is now living in the West but who has also lived for a number of years in the Islamic world and tried to engage seriously in the study of Islam. I will try to explain how and why I have come to adopt this approach, while recognising the diversity of views on the subject among Christians

Clearing the ground

Three points need to be made by way of introduction. Firstly, we need to be cautious about the expression 'Islamic terrorism'. It is an obvious fact that a number of people in recent years who happen to be Muslims have engaged in acts of terrorism, motivated by convictions that are firmly based on their Islamic beliefs. And since these Muslims who have turned to violence claim openly that they are acting in the name of Islam, there is *some* justification for describing these actions as 'Islamic'. But since, as we shall soon see, the majority of Muslims seem to condemn these actions as totally un-Islamic, we ought to be careful about attaching the word 'Islamic' in such a blanket way to *every* terrorist action carried out by Muslims. None of us would like to hear Muslims speaking about 'Christian Terrorism in Northern Ireland'. 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 what follows, therefore, I will deliberately avoid speaking of 'Islamic terrorism'.

Secondly, if at any stage it seems as if I am showing too much sympathy for terrorist actions carried out by Muslims, 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 it is carried out in the name of religion. What we have been witnessing in recent years is the emergence of a new style of terrorism whose primary purpose, in the words of Bernard Lewis of Princeton, is not to defeat or even to weaken the enemy militarily but to gain publicity and to inspire fear – a psychological victory' (). If, therefore, while trying to enter into the minds of terrorists and understand what they are so angry about, I suggest any sympathy with any of their grievances, I am not in any way condoning or justifying their murderous activities (). I take it for granted that a robust approach is required to the threat of terrorism in this or any other country. A firm stand against terrorism, however, needs to go hand in hand with serious reflection on the root cause of terrorism.

Thirdly, therefore, I believe 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. What has been done to them in the first place, however, is not often called 'terrorism', largely because it is carried out not by individuals but by governments and their armies. Observers are often quick to condemn the terrorism, but slow to say anything critical about the actions or the situations to which the terrorists are responding. So, for example, we don't hesitate to speak about Palestinian suicide bombers as terrorists. But we don't describe the helicopter gunship attack that killed Sheikh Yassin, an elderly disabled Hamas leader, on the steps of a mosque in Gaza with a rocket to the head as 'terrorism'. We were appalled and horrified by what happened in Beslan in September 2004. 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 didn't resort to suicide bombings until *after* a Jewish settler, Baruch Goldstein,

had killed 29 worshipers at the Mosque in Hebron in February '94. Terrorism, I suggest, 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.

Terrorist activities carried out by Muslims have to be understood within the context of the recent development of Islamism, which in turn has to be understood in the context of western involvement over many centuries in the Muslim world and especially in the Middle East. We need therefore to proceed in three stages. Firstly we ask: how and why did Islamism develop in the 20th Century, and why did some Islamists decide that violence and terrorism were sometimes justified? Secondly, how have Muslims generally responded to violence carried out by Muslims? And thirdly, how should Christians think about terrorism and violence of this kind that is carried out by Muslims?

1. How are we to explain the development of 'Islamic Fundamentalism' or Islamism?

Most scholars and commentators today have major reservations about using the word 'fundamentalism' in the context of Islam because it comes out of a very specific *Christian* context in the USA in the early 1900s and doesn't exactly fit the phenomenon that we're speaking about in this context (). They therefore prefer to use the terms 'Islamism', or 'Radical', 'Political', 'Revivalist', 'Reformist', 'Militant' or 'Activist' Islam.

a. Background and antecedents

- In the first century of Islam **the Kharijites**, literally 'Outsiders', were a very conservative, strict and puritanical movement, seeking to recall Muslims to the basic teaching of the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet and his immediate successors. They went so far as to wage war against fellow Muslims whom they regarded as infidels, and assassinated Ali, the son in law of the Prophet.

- **The Assassins** (from the Arabic *hashishiyya*, suggesting the idea of 'hashish takers') were extremist, secret communities of Shi'ites, based in Persia and Syria from the 11th to the 13th centuries. They were sent one by one by their leader, the Grand Master, to kill individuals with a dagger – usually political, military or religious leaders of the Abbasid dynasty in Baghdad. They carried out their targeted assassinations knowing that they would be killed by their captors, and were not allowed to commit suicide.

- **Ibn Taymiyya** (1268 – 1328) was a scholar and political activist who had to move from Iraq to Damascus because of the Mongol invasion. Starting from a literalist interpretation of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, he called for the renewal and reform of Islamic societies, pointing to the first state in Medina as the model of the Islamic state. Although the Mongols were Muslims, Ibn Taymiyya issued a legal ruling (*fatwa*), describing them as unbelievers (*kuffar*) and apostates who needed to be resisted by force. He has been described as 'the spiritual father of (Sunni) revolutionary Islam' ().

- In the 18th Century there were a number of revivalist movements in the Sudan, Libya, Nigeria, India, SE Asia and Arabia, where the movement was founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703 – 1791) and known as **Wahhabism**. This fundamentalist, puritanical form of Islam was later used by Abdulaziz ibn Saud in a kind of holy war to gain control of the Hejaz in 1927 and then to establish the kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. In 1933 an agreement was signed with Standard Oil Company of California allowing them to extract oil. Wahhabism therefore became, in the words of Bernard Lewis ‘the official, state-enforced doctrine of one of the most influential governments in all Islam – the custodian of the two holiest places of Islam ...’ Commenting on the way the historical accidents of Saudi politics and the discovery of oil have been so influential, he adds that ‘The custodianship of the holy places and the revenues of oil have given worldwide impact to what would otherwise have been an extremist fringe in a marginal country’ (.

b. Key ideologues

- **Hassan al-Banna** (1906 – 1949) was a school teacher who became actively involved in the campaign to get the British out of Egypt, and founded the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928. Attributing the weakness of the Muslim world to its departure from true Islam and to the corrupting influence of the West, he called for *jihad* to implement reforms in society.

- **Mawlana Abul A’la Mawdudi** (1903 – 1979) was a journalist in the Indian sub-continent who shared the same outlook as al-Banna. He described Islam as ‘a comprehensive system that tends to annihilate all tyrannical and evil systems in the world and enforce its own program ... a revolutionary concept and ideology which seeks to change and revolutionise the world social order and reshape it according to its own concept and ideals’ (4). He founded the Jamaat-i-Islami in 1929 and supported the creation of Pakistan as an Islamic state. His writings were widely distributed all over the Muslim world and had a profound influence on Muslims in many different contexts.

- **Sayyid Qutb** (1906 – 1966) worked for some years as a school teacher in Egypt and then as a government official in the Ministry of Education. While he admired many things in the West, as a result of two years spent in the US between 1948 and 1950, he became a strong critic of what he saw as degenerate Western societies. He worked with the Muslim Brotherhood, and was critical of the secularist approach of Nasser’s revolution in Egypt. During the nine years that he spent in prison, he wrote one of his most important works, *Signposts on the Way*, which was published in 1964 after his release from prison, and which transformed the teaching of al-Banna and Mawdudi into ‘a rejectionist, revolutionary call to arms’ (). He believed that violence and terrorism were justified in the *jihad* to overthrow existing governments which were not sufficiently Islamic.

- **Dr Abdullah Azzam**, originally from Jordan, has been a strong advocate of militant, global *jihad*, and is significant because he was one of Osama bin Laden’s university

teachers in Saudi Arabia. ‘*Jihad*,’ he wrote, ‘and the rifle alone: no negotiations, no conferences, and no dialogues ... *jihad* will remain an individual obligation until all other lands that were Muslim are returned to us so that Islam will reign again: before us lie Palestine, Bokhara, Lebanon, Chad, Eritrea, Somalia, the Philippines, Burma, Southern Yemen, Tashkent and Andalusia [southern Spain]’ ().

c. Significant dates

- It is hard to exaggerate the significance of the **Six Day War in June 1967** in the development of Islamism. The humiliating defeat of the Arab armies which attacked Israel is seen by Muslims and Arabs as the lowest point ever reached by the Muslim world. Egypt’s brief victory in October 1973 restored some sense of pride, and was followed by the Arab oil embargo. But the shame of the defeat in 1967 still remains.

- **The Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979** ousted the pro-West Shah and brought into existence the Islamic Republic, led by Ayatollah Khomeini. America became the main target of Muslim anger and contempt, being labelled as ‘The Great Satan’ ().

In 1979 the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, and this was an event which had a profound effect on Osama bin Laden. The seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in the same year showed the depth of hostility to the Saudi authorities.

- In **1989 the Soviet forces were forced to withdraw from Afghanistan**, driven out by Afghan fighters who were supported by Osama bin Laden’s Al-Qa’ida and Muslim fighters from the Arab world, and supplied with weapons from the US (). Defeating the army of the second most powerful nation in the world gave an enormous boost to the confidence of these Muslim fighters, encouraging them to turn their attention to the most powerful nation of all, the US. ‘The Soviet-Afghan war,’ says John Esposito, ‘marked a new turning point as jihad went global to a degree never seen in the past’ ().

- When **Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990**, American forces were stationed in Saudi Arabia. This was another deeply traumatic experience for Osama bin Laden, and set him on a collision course with the Saudi government.

- In **1996** Osama bin Laden fled from the Sudan to join the Taliban in Afghanistan, who by 1998 had taken over most of the country. In August **1998** bin Laden issued his first *fatwa* calling for US forces to be driven out of Saudi Arabia. In the same month there was the bombing of the embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salam. A later *fatwa* called on all Muslims to kill US citizens and their allies.

- On 11 September **2001** around 3,000 people were killed in the attacks in New York and Washington. And on March **2004** around 200 were killed in the bombings on the trains in Madrid which brought down the Spanish government. The attacks in London on 7 July, 2005, killed 5 people and injured around 1 .

What is most significant from this brief survey is that bin Laden and those associated with him represent what Esposito calls ‘the radical fringe of a broad based Islamic

jihād that began in the late 20th century’ and that al-Qa’ida represents ‘a watershed for contemporary Islamic radicalism’ (). What was new was the way in which from the 1990s America and the West became ‘a primary target in an unholy war of terrorism’ ().

d. Major grievances and goals

The basic grievances of all Islamists – whether or not they resort to violence - 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. ‘From their point of view,’ says Bernard Lewis, ‘the ultimate struggle is not against the Western intruder but against the Westernizing traitor at home. Their most dangerous enemies, as they see it, are the false and renegade Muslims who rule the countries of the Islamic world and who have imported and imposed infidel ways on Muslim peoples’ ().
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.

Islamism is therefore the angry response of Muslims who are painfully aware of the decline of Islam and the resurgence of the West. We could say that for Muslims, it shouldn't be like this - that the world of Islam (*dar al-Islam*) becomes subject to the non-Muslim world (*dar al-harb*). This might be called 'the great reversal': *we* Muslims should be ruling over *them*, non-Muslims, not *them* ruling over *us*! The giant has been stung, wounded and humiliated, and Islamism is one major response of the awakening giant.

Those who turn to terrorism are a minority among the Islamists; but their violence has to be seen in the context of the whole Islamist movement. In the words of Bernard Lewis, 'Popular sentiment is not entirely wrong in seeing the Western world and Western ideas as the ultimate source of the major changes that have transformed the Islamic world in the last century or more. As a consequence, much of the anger in the Islamic world is directed against the Westerner, seen as the ancient and immemorial enemy of Islam since the first clashes between the Muslim caliphs and the Christian emperors, and against the Westernizer, seen as a tool or accomplice of the West and as a traitor to his own faith and people' ().

If by this stage we still find it hard to get inside the world-view of Islamists, it may be helpful to listen to these words of an American, Paul Kennedy, writing in the *Wall Street Journal* in October 2001 (a month after 9/11), which represent a powerful appeal by an American to fellow-Americans to 'see ourselves as others see us':

'How do we appear to *them*, and what would it be like were our places in the world reversed ... Suppose that there existed today a powerful, unified Arab-Muslim state that stretched from Algeria to Turkey and Arabia – as there was 400 years ago, the Ottoman Empire. Suppose this unified Arab-Muslim state had the biggest economy in the world, and the most effective military. Suppose by contrast this United States of ours had split into 12 or 15 countries, with different regimes, some conservative and corrupt. Suppose that the great Arab-Muslim power had its aircraft carriers cruising off our shores, its aircraft flying over our lands, its satellites watching us every day. Suppose that its multinational corporations had reached into North America to extract oil, and paid the corrupt, conservative governments big royalties for that. Suppose that it dominate all international institutions like the Security Council and the IMF. Suppose that there was a special state set up in North America fifty years ago, of a different religion and language to ours, and the giant Arab-Muslim power always gave it support. Suppose the Colossus state was bombarding us with cultural messages, about the status of women, about sexuality, that we found offensive. Suppose it was always urging us to change, to modernise, to go global, to follow its example. Hmm ... in those conditions, would not many Americans steadily grow to loath that Colossus, wish it harm? And perhaps try to harm it? I think so' ().

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

The events of 9/11 put many Muslims on the spot, forcing them to declare what they thought about the attacks. 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 the infidels, as he went on building the Islamic state.' The Al-Muhajirun movement in the UK on 12 September, 2001, addressed fellow-Muslims in the UK in these words: 'Muslims, stand together and united our Ummah (community) to fight against the enemies of Allah ... and his Messenger Muhammad in this time of need.' There were reports of Arab Muslims dancing in the streets after they heard the news of the attacks, and The Hamas weekly on 13 September, 2001, wrote, 'Allah has answered our prayers' (16).

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 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' (17). Similarly Ziauddin Sardar wrote on 23 September, 2001: 'To Muslims everywhere I issue this *fatwa* (legal ruling): any Muslim involved in the planning, financing, training, recruiting, support or harbouring of those who commit acts of indiscriminate violence against persons or the apparatus or infrastructure of states is guilty of terror and no part of the Ummah. It is the duty of every Muslim to spare no effort in hunting down, apprehending and bringing such criminals to justice' (). This, therefore, is the position of those who believe that these extremists 'hijack Islamic discourse and belief to justify their acts of terrorism' () and dissociate themselves totally from their actions.

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

Many Muslims on the streets in different countries have been caught in a dilemma because they could understand the thinking of the hijackers and shared some of their anger. They have had some sympathy with them, but couldn't bring themselves either to condemn or to approve of their actions. This reaction therefore 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 in Muslim communities in the West, around 10% would identify with a; between 30 and 40% would go with b., leaving between 40 and 60% with c.

Crucial theological questions for Muslims

The basic question here is this: how can a religion whose historical origins were undeniably associated with a considerable amount of violence present itself today as ‘a religion of peace’? During his early ministry in Mecca, Muhammad was a persecuted prophet. But the situation changed completely with the *hijra* and the creation of the Islamic state in Medina in 622 CE. Muhammad was now both prophet and statesman, imposing the law of God on the whole community, leading 27 different raids on neighbouring tribes and cities, and commanding his army in a series of three major battles. He had a very difficult relationship with the three Jewish tribes in Medina which refused to accept him as a prophet and colluded with his enemies, and were therefore regarded as traitors. As a result two tribes were driven out into exile; and over 600 men of a third tribe were beheaded and their wives and children sold into slavery. The re-conquest of Mecca was peaceful and Muhammad issued an amnesty to all his earlier enemies in the city. Authoritative Islamic sources, however, describe a number of violent actions authorised by Muhammad during the Medinan period – like the killing of a poet who ridiculed him ().

Before his death he was making preparations for his armies to march out of Arabia into Egypt, Palestine and Syria. When, after his death, a number of tribes in Arabia withdrew their allegiance to Islam, there were the so-called ‘Wars of Apostasy’ aimed at bringing the whole of Arabia back under the control of Islam. Three of the Caliphs who ruled after Muhammad’s death were murdered. By 732, a hundred years after the death of the Prophet, Muslim armies had extended the rule of Islam from Morocco, Spain and France in the West to the borders of India and China in the East. It is for reasons such as these that Peter Riddell and Peter Cotterell do not hesitate to speak of Islam as ‘cradled in violence’ ().

When Muslims today reflect on their scriptural sources and their history, therefore, there are at least three questions that they have to address:

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

The word *jihad* simply means ‘struggle’, and is used in the Qur’an to speak of struggle ‘in the path of God’. Over the centuries it has become, in the words of John Esposito, ‘a defining concept or belief in Islam, a key element in what it means to be a believer and follower of God’s will ... a universal religious obligation for all true Muslims to join the jihad to promote a global Islamic revolution’ (). For many Muslims it has come to be regarded as the sixth Pillar of Islam, alongside the other five (Confession of the Faith, Prayer, Fasting, Almsgiving and Pilgrimage), and therefore an obligation that is laid on all Muslims.

This is Esposito’s summary of how *jihad* was understood for centuries in Islamic law:

‘Islamic law stipulates that it is a Muslim’s duty to wage war not only against those who attack Muslim territory, but also against polytheists, apostates, and People of the Book (at first restricted to Jews and Christians but later extended to Zoroastrians and other faiths) who refuse Muslim rule. Muslims gave these people two choices: conversion or submission to Muslim rule with the right to retain their

religion and pay a poll tax (a common practice applied to outsiders, within and outside of Arabic). If they refused both of these options, they were subject to war. Muslim jurists saw jihad as a requirement in a world divided between what they called *dar al-islam* (land of Islam) and the *dar al-harb* (land of war). The Muslim community was required to engage in the struggle to expand the dar al-islam throughout the world so that all of humankind would have the opportunity to live within a just political and social order. One school of law, the Shafii, posited a third category, the land of treaty (*dar al-sulh*), a territory that had concluded a truce with a Muslim government' ().

In recent years many of 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 ... Kill them wherever you find them and drive them out from wherever they drove you out. Sedition is worse than slaughter (*qatl*) ... Fight them until there is no sedition and the religion becomes that of Allah ...' (2:190 – 193, translated by Majid Fakhry.).

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.).

Many Muslims are aware of the differences of tone between verses encouraging an aggressive approach and those that are much more moderate. Some scholars argue that every verse of this kind needs to be understood in the context in which it was revealed to the Prophet, and cannot therefore be made the basis for a general rule. Others, however, have argued that the stronger verses abrogate the earlier verses which condemn aggression.

Islamic law which was formulated in the three centuries after the death of Muhammad insisted that *jihad* could only be defensive. It included many stipulations about the circumstances in which *jihad* could be declared, and laid down many rules about the conduct of war. Muslim scholars therefore had a real problem in giving a justification for their wars of conquest in the Middle East and North Africa. William Shepherd, a Christian scholar of Islam, suggests that 'The purpose of conquest was not to impose Islam but to create a situation in which Islam could have a hearing' (). Perhaps,

however, it would be more accurate to say that one of the purposes of conquest *was* to extend Islam, but by creating a total Islamic environment rather than by forcing individuals to become Muslims ().

For many Islamists today, however, *jihad* can be *both* offensive *and* defensive at the same time, since attacking enemies wherever they are may be the most effective form of defence. 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' ().

We seem, therefore, to be left with a real tension between the two significantly different approaches adopted by Muslims, which is summed up by Esposito in this way: 'Muslims who insist that the defence of Islam is the only justification for jihad, and that all of the wars in the early days of Islam were defensive, have been criticized by others who believe that the restriction of jihad to defensive wars alone is a product of European colonialism and an unwarranted accommodation to the West' ().

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 as 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' ().

Martyrdom has played a specially important part in the thinking of Shi'ites because of the martyrdom of Hussein. In the Iran-Iraq War hundreds of thousands of Iranian boy soldiers walked into certain death to prepare the way for regular soldiers. What seems to have happened in recent years is that because of the many situations in which Muslims have been engaged in the defence of Muslim territory, suicide has become acceptable both to some Shi'ites and to some Sunnis *in the context of jihad*. It has come to be regarded by some Muslims as a legitimate way of fighting against the enemies of Islam. As one martyr said before his death, 'The quickest and safest way to Paradise is to die fighting for it'.

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, both of the London School of Theology: '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.

3. How should Christians think about terrorism that is carried out by Muslims?

We have to acknowledge here that Christians are divided – sometimes quite sharply - over these issues. At the risk of over-simplification, we can say that there are basically two kinds of answer that are given by Christians:

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.*'

According to this answer, the heart of the problem has to do with Islamic belief, and the importance of political issues has been greatly exaggerated – both by Muslims and non-Muslims. Christians who give this answer would therefore tend to agree with Samuel Huntington, who wrote in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (1997): 'The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture, and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power' ().

Riddell and Cotterell identify with this kind of answer in their book *Islam in Conflict: past, present and future*:

'In our view it is not the non-Muslim world that stands at the crossroads, but the Muslim world. Islam has, throughout its history, contained within itself a channel of violence, legitimised by certain passages of the Qur'an, though put in question by other passages... Ultimately it is only the Muslim world that can deal with the roots of the problem, which, in our view, do *not* lie in Western materialism or nineteenth-century colonialism or American imperialism, but in Islam's own history, both distant and recent' ().

'... the violence threatened by Islamic radicals against the West and the divisions within Islam itself ultimately owe more to the ambiguities of the Islamic scripture than to modern political issues' ().

'... it is far too simplistic to suggest that the antipathy exclusively results from these foreign policy issues. Rather, it derives from a potent cocktail of ingredients that go far back in time, to the beginnings of Muslim-Christian historical contact and to the very Islamic texts themselves. This long-term antipathy and hatred is fed by modern issues: matters of foreign policy, the effects of globalisation in its various forms, Westophobia in the Muslim media, and rampant conspiracy theorizing ... It is not correct to suggest that America's foreign policy preceded and caused anti-Western and anti-American sentiment in the Muslim world. Rather, the preexisting antipathy has been fuelled by the foreign policy issues that have been discussed' ().

Similarly Patrick Sookhdeo, the Director of the Institute for the Study of Islam and Christianity and the Barnabas Trust, believes that 'violence and terrorism do form an

intrinsic part of classical Islam' (), and that political issues are very secondary to theological issues:

'The primary motivation of terrorists and suicide bombers is theological, compounded mainly of duty and reward ... If terrorism is going to be dealt with at its source, Islam has to change and undergo a transformation. In the long term it would appear that the only way to bring an end to Islamic terrorism is to reform the teaching of Islam with regard to war and violence ... Without a theology to fuel it, Islamic terrorism would eventually shrivel and die ... Unless the militant interpretation of Islamic sources is recognised as the basic cause of Islamic terrorist activities, there is little hope of a lasting solution ().

While he recognises the need for 'going some way towards meeting certain Muslim grievances' (), the overwhelming emphasis in his approach is that the fundamental problem lies with Muslims and their theology: 'Ultimately it is for the Muslim world to address the issues and consider what changes can be brought about' (). Thus he ends a major recent article in the *Spectator* entitled 'The Myth of Moderate Islam' with the sentence: 'It will be a long, hard road for Islam to get its house in order so that it can co-exist peacefully with the rest of society in the 21st century' ().

Answer 2: 'While recognising 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 acknowledge the seriousness of the political issues alongside the theological issues, seeking to understand each of them in its own terms. We should therefore attempt to understand the anger of Muslims and acknowledge that in some cases they have good reasons for their anger.'

This view insists that the political issues are highly significant and really do need to be addressed. It allows Muslim the right to interpret their own diversity and takes seriously the way the majority of Muslims respond to Islamism. This view is well summed up by John Esposito, who writes: 'As Islamic history makes abundantly clear, mainstream Islam, in law and theology as well as in practice, in the end has always rejected or marginalized extremists and terrorists from the Kharijites and Assassins to contemporary radical movements such as al-Qaeda' (). Similarly, while Bernard Lewis would not identify himself with every aspect of this answer, he sums up accurately the view that recent Islamic terrorism is totally inconsistent with Islamic theology and tradition: 'Can these in any sense be justified in terms of Islam? The answer must be a clear no. The callous destruction of thousands in the World Trade Center, including many who were not American, some of them Muslims from Muslim countries, has no justification in Islamic doctrine or law and no precedent in Islamic history. Indeed, there are few acts of comparable deliberate and indiscriminate wickedness in human history. These are not just crimes against humanity and against civilization; they are also acts – from a Muslim point of view – of blasphemy, when those who perpetrate such crimes claim to be doing so in the name of God His Prophet, and His scriptures' ().

In trying to make up our minds between these two main responses, I suggest that the issue boils down to the relative importance we give to history and politics on the one hand and religion and theology on the other. Answer 1. says that theology is primary

and that politics secondary. It argues that the anger of the Muslim world can hardly be justified, and that even if all the grievances were dealt with and all the conflicts resolved, Muslims would still find other causes to fight about because their scriptures call for conflict and war in the path of God (38). *The problem is with them and the way they think far more than with us and what we in the West have done to them.*

Answer 2. says that the violent responses of some Muslims are perfectly understandable, even if they are to be condemned. The West *does* have something to answer for – both in the past and the present. The West is not as innocent and blameless as it likes to think it is. Scripture and theology are highly significant, because political issues in recent history have reminded Muslims of the experience of the Prophet and the divine revelation that came to him in many situations. But we dare not minimise the significance of the political issues by suggesting that theology has precedence over everything else. *The problem is with us and what we have done to them just as much as with them and the way they think.*

In case it's not already obvious that I support the second answer rather than the first, let me go on to elaborate how this approach works out in practice.

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, put all their energies into 'the war on terror' (). If they tried at all to understand the thinking of the Islamists, they found it impossible to engage with their agenda. What worries me about the response of some Christians is that they spiritualise too much, wanting to interpret everything in the world in spiritual terms. 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.

I therefore disagree with Kanan Makiya of Harvard, who is quoted (it seems with approval) by Riddell and Cotterell:

'To argue, as many Arabs and Muslims are doing today (and not a few liberal Western voices), that "Americans should ask themselves why they are so hated in the world" is to make such a concession; it is to provide a justification, however, unwillingly, for this kind of warped mind-set ... Worse than being wrong, however, it is morally bankrupt, to say nothing of being counterproductive. For every attempt to "rationalise" or "explain" the new anti-Americanism rampant in so much of the Muslim and Arab worlds bolsters the project of the perpetrators of the heinous act of 11 September, which is to blur the lines that separate their sect of a few hundred people from hundreds of millions of peace-loving Muslims and Arabs' ().

Understanding extremists and terrorists 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).*

I am a child of the Raj, born in India, where my father was not a missionary but a soldier and then a policeman in the Indian Police. In reading about the history of British rule in India, I have to recognise the painful ambiguities involved in Britain's days of empire. It wasn't all bad; but it wasn't all good either! ().

I have never forgotten my embarrassment on one occasion when I was studying Arabic at the American University in Cairo. We were reading a historical text about the Urabi Revolution of 1882 and the bombardment of Alexandria by the British navy - which at the time (I have to confess) I knew nothing about. I have to admit, of course, that I fully understand the feelings of Egyptians who wanted to get rid of the British and run their own country.

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 in order 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 them 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 might be 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 the late 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 don't need to take *all* the criticisms from Muslims lying down or to be ashamed of *everything* in our imperial past. We may sometimes need to listen to people like Lamin Sanneh, a Christian from a Muslim background in Gambia and now a professor at Yale. Part of his message to Western Christians is: 'When are you going to get over your guilt complex about your past? It wasn't all bad! Your missionaries and colonialists in Africa, for example, provided the nationals with many of the tools they needed later to run their own countries' ().

So 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:

- 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 and other minorities?
- While blaming others, are you willing to accept *any* of the responsibility as your own? Are you always going to engage in what Bernard Lewis calls 'the blame game' – blaming others for our 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 the 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 verse 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?

Sadly we have to recognise that political correctness often doesn't allow us to ask some of these questions. But if we can ever meet with Muslims on anything like a level playing field, and if there is a relationship of trust and openness, I believe that we may need to engage in this kind of 'hard talk' (). But I emphasise that this can only be done when we have listened and responded to the hard questions that *they* have put to *us*.

4. *Christians 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 many Christians tend to think of righteousness in very personal, even pietistic terms. It's something that 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 *dikaionome* 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 don't 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. It is already clear that Sharon is using his disengagement from Gaza completed in August 2005 to strengthen his claim to hold on to - and even expand - most of the settlements on the West Bank.

It is highly significant that two major Christian development agencies, Christian Aid and World Vision, have for some time been engaging actively in advocacy over a number of issues – including world trade and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Not only are they providing relief to people in need and trying to help them to feed themselves. They have realised that they must address the root causes of poverty, and this involves, among other things, challenging the way the West largely determines the rule of world trade and campaigning against Israel's Security Wall/Fence.

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 and find ways to engage in the battle*

Riddell and Cotterell rightly point out 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’ (), ending his book *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* with these words:

‘While some forms of terrorism, like some forms of cancer, respond to radical surgery, this deadly disease can only be effectively countered first by understanding how it originates, grows stronger, and spreads and then by taking action. The cancer of global terrorism will continue to afflict the international body until we address its political and economic causes, causes that will otherwise continue to provide a breeding ground for hatred and radicalism, the rise of extremist movements, and recruits for the bin Ladens of this world’ ().

Unfortunately it’s not always easy to engage in dialogue with convinced Islamists. But the approach that has been developed here would suggest that Christians should be encouraging our governments in the West, while protecting themselves against terrorism, to address at the same time the root cause of terrorism. The challenge before us, therefore, is to find practical ways in which moderate Muslims and non-Muslims all over the world can engage with Islamists, pointing to alternative, but genuinely Islamic, models of how to change the world.

Christians involved in this task should be able to bring a strong determination that is grounded on the words of the Apostle Paul: ‘Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good’ (Rom 12:21). It’s hard of course for any nation – let alone for all the nations in the West – to follow an ethic which is based on the teaching and example of Christ and commended to Christians as individuals and communities. But perhaps this needs to be part of a *genuinely Christian contribution* to the debate that is raging in our country.

END

NOTES

1. Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*, Phoenix, 2004, p 125
2. John L. Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*, Oxford University Press, 2003, p 45
3. Lewis, pp 109 and 111
4. Esposito, p 55
5. Esposito, p 56
6. Esposito, p 7
7. Esposito, p 157
8. Esposito, p xii
9. Esposito, p 73
10. 'Bin Laden's Warning: Full Text', quoted in Esposito, p 22
11. Lewis, p 113
12. Lewis, p 137
13. Lewis, p 115
14. Lewis, p 113
15. Esposito, pp 155-156
16. Lewis, p 134
17. Zaki Badawi, *Thought for the Day*, BBC Radio 4, September 13, 2001, quoted in Peter G. Riddell and Peter Cotterell, *Islam in Conflict: past, present and future*, IVP, 2003, p 183
18. Ziauddin Sardar, 'My Fatwa on the Fanatics', *Sunday Observer (London)*, September 23, 2001, quoted in Riddell and Cotterell, p 184
19. Esposito, p ix
20. Lewis, p 132
21. See Riddell and Cotterell, pp 26-30
22. Riddell and Cotterell, p 212
23. Esposito, p 27
24. Esposito, pp 34-35
25. Lewis, p 27
26. Majid Fakhry, translator, *An Interpretation of the Qur'an*, Garnet, 2002
27. William Shephard, 'The Right to be Wrong', *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol 13:1, January 1992, p 230. See further discussion on these issues in Colin Chapman, *Islam and the West: conflict, co-existence or conversion?*, chapter 8, 'Islamic Mission in the Past: Persuasion without Compulsion?', pp 29-56

28. Esposito, pp 22 and 24
29. Esposito, p 67
30. Lewis, p 130
31. Riddell and Cotterell, p 192
32. Esposito, p 127
33. Riddell and Cotterell, pp 7-8
34. Riddell and Cotterell, p 213
35. Riddell and Cotterell, p 163
36. Esposito, p 128
37. Lewis, pp 131-132
38. See Riddell and Cotterell, p 168
39. Riddell and Cotterell, pp 190-191
40. See David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: the Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*, Phoenix, 2003
41. See further Colin Chapman, 'Israel as a Focus for the Anger of Muslims Against the West' in R. Geaves, T. Gabriel, Y. Haddad & J.I. Smith, (eds), *Islam and the West Post 9/11*, Ashgate, 2004
42. Lamin Sanneh, 'Christian Mission and the Western Guilt Complex', in *Evangelical Quarterly*, ? 1994 ?
- 43, Lewis, p 159
44. Riddell and Cotterell, p 192
45. Esposito, p 28
46. Esposito, p 160

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