

Post Paris-Attack Sermon

November 20, 2015

I was in England when Paris was attacked. English media tends to be fairly right wing and it didn't take long before the terror attacks were being linked with refugees coming into Europe. But the response was nothing as venomous as it has been here in the US. Yesterday, the House voted nonsensical and impossible extra screening measures for Syrian and Iraqi refugees, with the Director of National Intelligence having to sign off personally on each refugee. Extraordinarily, nearly fifty Democrats voted in favour of the Bill, saying that the Paris attacks were a game-changer. Now, Donald Trump, the clear front runner of the Republican nomination for President of the United States, has openly said that he will require all Muslims to be registered. When asked how that was different from the Nazi registration of Jews, he simply kept replying, "You tell me. You tell me." Where in previous years any similarity with Nazi policy had the potential to ruin a candidate's chance of winning an election, in America in 2015, it seemingly has the potential to help. This is, in my opinion, the most terrifying political turn of events in America in the modern age.

And what are we doing about it? We're allowing ourselves to be guided by conversations about National Security and Global Security. Let's be really clear about National Security. If you're worried about Americans being killed in mass shootings, restrict the gun laws. There are infinitely more innocent Americans murdered every year by white Christian Americans than by Middle-Eastern Muslim terrorists. If National Security means protecting American citizens throughout the nation, then restricting refugees fleeing from war should not even enter the conversation. This is not a security issue – to say as much is an outright lie. While Republicans, including New Mexico's governor Martinez, indicate that there is too much of a threat to America to house these individuals, the White House correctly points out that 2,174 Syrians have been admitted to the US since the attacks in September 2001 and none of them have been arrested or deported for terror offences. I understand that the 9/11 attacks profoundly scarred the collective American psyche but we have to ask why did the Oklahoma bombing not do the same? Why is Paris a game-changer as some have said and not the similar and sometimes far bloodier attacks in Beirut, or Nigeria, or anywhere else in the world? Nearly 3000 people died in the 9/11 attacks and it changed the global political scene, or, at least, was the excuse to change it. Over 2000 people died in Nigeria days before the Charlie Hebdo murders, and yet this

wasn't even covered by most of the media. So, given the constant terror attacks around the world, why is Paris being used as a game-changer? Why, indeed, was Anders Breivik's slaughter of 70 people due to his fundamentalist Christian agenda not a global game-changer? Because he acted alone? Guess what? So did the individuals who attacked Paris last week.

ISIS is not interested in attacking America. It has openly stated that it first wants to deal with local Shias, then Sunni supporters of the Saudi regime and only then to turn to the "crusaders" of the West. The terrorists who attacked Paris were supporters of ISIS, and ISIS condoned the attack and claimed it as their own, but that masks an important reality. ISIS has set itself up as a Muslim Caliphate and it is the duty of every Muslim who believes in it to live there. Indeed, ISIS showed videos of its supporters having arrived and burning their passports. As Graeme Wood so rightly pointed out in *The Atlantic* magazine back in March, "This would be an eccentric act for someone intending to return to blow himself up in line at the Louvre or to hold another chocolate shop hostage in Sydney." Wood explains that most lone wolf attackers are individuals who cannot get to the Caliphate that ISIS claims to have set up, because their passports have been confiscated or for other similar difficulties. So, these home-grown individuals who cannot emigrate try to further the aims of ISIS at home.

What are the aims of ISIS? To return Islam to its very earliest pre-medieval form, to spread a caliphate that uses Sharia law across the world and to bring about the End of Days. ISIS cannot accept any other government, it does not accept national borders, it cannot accept the Other. It is obliged theologically to wage war against the other in order to continue to expand. First, though, it must go to war against its neighbours. Not against America, not against France or Britain, but against its neighbours because it needs to expand its territory in order to continue existing. Where Al-Qa'eda has tended to avoid apocalyptic rhetoric, Wood points out that ISIS embraces it and that is where I believe the attacks in Paris come into play.

The response to the attacks from an overwhelming majority of people online was to add a French flag to their profile. This act of communal solidarity was, of course, utterly tokenistic, and once again begs the question as to why people didn't add the Nigerian flag after Nigeria suffered terrorist attacks, or the Lebanese flag after the terror attack on Beirut a day before the Paris attacks? Could it be because the attack on Beirut was a direct response to Hezbollah joining the fight against ISIS, and no-one wants to show any

sense of unity with Hezbollah, despite the enemy of my enemy being my friend? Or, more likely, as I saw stated this week, was it simply because we feel that France is cultured and safe and like us, while we still see Nigeria and Lebanon as violent and backwards and thus somehow more likely or perhaps even deserving of terror? The bland, ineffective tokenism of placing a French flag on one's Facebook profile stands in direct contrast to the political response, which has been to continue talk of closing borders, screening refugees and of The War on Terror. Let's be clear, though. There is no war on terror. There cannot be a war on terror because terror is an idea. As Gore Vidal once said, since terror is an abstract "a war on terrorism is like a war on dandruff. That war will be eternal and pointless. It's idiotic. That's not a war, it's a slogan. It's a lie. It's advertising." Part of that advertising slogan is that the people who commit these attacks, and indeed all of ISIS, are not real Muslims. We have to believe that for the military war on terror to continue. That way, we can bomb the crap out of anyone we want, regardless of their faith, and not say it's an ideological battle. But it is.

The problem is that it's not the ideological battle that many people think it is. Senator Marco Rubio, another Republican candidate, just this morning outlined his plan for defeating ISIS. The four-point plan covers (1) stopping refugees from entering the US, (2) removing military spending restrictions, (3) making the US Armed Forces' mission the total destruction of ISIS and (4) engaging in a no-fly zone in Syria. He wants a ground war with ISIS. He says that this is an ideological battle, just the same as George Bush said that we were now in a war for democracy itself. What he, and many others, fails to realise is that the way he understands this ideological battle is exactly what ISIS wants. Why have tens of thousands of people flocked from all around the world to join ISIS? This question isn't being asked. It's because people are tired of American imperialism and of the decadent, hedonistic, capitalist lifestyle that is devoid of meaning and clearly designed to make people buy things instead of designed to make people happy. ISIS openly wants a ground war with America because it clearly says in Muslim tradition that the End of Days will come about after a great war against the anti-Muslim forces. (By the way, it says something very similar in Jewish tradition – that the End of Days will only come about after a devastating war between Gog and Magog. That's worth mentioning because we cannot pretend that Islam is the only religion that talks of apocalypse – Judaism and Christianity clearly do, too.) But we have to be very wary of military strategies like Rubio's because, while limited military engagements may stop the caliphate from expanding, total ground war with ISIS could result in

two possibilities. Yes, it could weaken or destroy ISIS, which, unlike Al Qaeda, needs territory to exist because a caliphate without territory isn't a caliphate at all. So that is possible. What's also possible, though, is America once again tries to impose its will on another part of the world through military might and that actually strengthens the case of those who oppose such actions and who say that America does not respect other cultures and people and will kill its citizens until it has imposed an American way of life in the new country. That could in turn attract more people to ISIS and make it stronger. Remember, of course, that the American led conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have led to failed states that have become hotbeds for extremists. The more American military intervention in countries, the more destabilised they become, and the greater the threat they pose for future generations as a result.

So, some have responded to the recent terror attacks with bland tokenistic displays of unity that make no practical difference in the world. Following the Charlie Hebdo murders, people around the world started posting "Je Suis Charlie" or "Je Suis Ahmed" to say that we are all one in the fight against terror. This week, after a police dog was killed rooting out the rest of the French terror cell, people started posting "Je suis chien – I am a dog." The sentiment is strong, but ultimately meaningless, especially when it gets to the point of "I am a dog." To say we're all one is great, until you realise it actually means, "We're all one against terrorism." What's the problem with that? We know that already. But what are we actually going to do to defeat terrorism? Mere sentiment is not enough. And all being one against terrorism is fine, except different people have very different understandings of what that means. So we're not as united as the simple action of posting a flag may suggest.

Some have responded to the recent terror attacks by saying the followers of ISIS are not really Muslims. That is palpably untrue. They know their Islam inside and out. They are definitely Muslims. They are just not moderate Muslims. They are trying to return Islam to its original, pre-medieval form, and that clashes with contemporary ethics. When they behead individuals, or stone them, or crucify them, or amputate their limbs, or lash them, or when they enslave people, they do so fully with the backing of Islamic Sharia law. To pretend that they don't is to whitewash the ancient texts of another tradition. The same applies to Judaism. When Yigal Amir murdered Yitzchak Rabin, or when Baruch Goldstein ran into a mosque and started slaughtering Muslims, they did so as Jews. The Jewish community did not disavow them of their Judaism because it could not. All ancient texts have

problematic elements in them. As Reform Jews, we accept that. To say that ISIS is not Muslim is to spread the lie that this is just a war on terror. This is an ideological war but not of people who love us versus people who hate us. This is an ideological war on how religious texts are used. We cannot say, as many people have done, that Islam is a religion of peace just the same way that we cannot say that Judaism is a religion of peace. There are texts in both traditions that we would today consider morally reprehensible. And that's the point. We can read Torah as Reform Jews and say, "We understand that that's how ancient Israel understood God's call but we understand it differently." But the progressive branch of Islam is not yet fully developed in the same way as it is in Judaism so that's not as easy to do in a Muslim context.

The war on terror is an ideological war but not one that can be fought by military means. To do so actually runs the risk of prolonging the war. You can't bomb an ideology out of existence. We must accept that there have always been and there will always be acts of terror. We tend to think of these acts of terror as usually being based in nationalism or extremist religion. But an individual running into a movie theatre and murdering everyone inside is an act of terror. A college student murdering classmates is an act of terror. These terror attacks occur frequently in this country. If we want to truly engage in a war on terror, we have to understand why people engage in such acts and work to change society so that such acts are reduced in number. There are those who say that terrorist acts are different because they are organised by coordinated terror groups but that's simply not true. Lone wolf attacks like those we saw in France are uncoordinated on a grand scale. They are designed by individuals to create the illusion of America under attack by a great coordinated enemy who, in fact, wants nothing more than the End of Days to come about through America's military retaliation. **The ideological war is one that starts with the question, "Why are people in wealthy, democratic 21st century societies drawn to forms of religion that are so extreme as to encourage extreme violence against other people?"** Why would anyone give up a comfortable life in America, Britain, France, Australia or anywhere similar and spend the rest of their now likely shortened life in armed conflict based on a particular reading of an ancient religious text? Why is death more appealing than life? If we want to beat religious terror, which is only one form of terror, then we have to address those questions. That means taking a long, hard look at our own society and asking why it is failing so many people. And once we recognise and acknowledge those failures, we can start to address them.

Registering Muslims, limiting refugees from war-torn countries, calling for all-out war against ISIS....none of these are appropriate responses to terror. We must recognise the terror threat from within is far greater than that from without for two reasons – (1) far more Americans die from Christian attacks than from Muslim attacks, and (2) worldwide, far more Muslims die from Muslim attacks than Christians, Jews or anyone else combined. The immediate target of Islamic terror is unfaithful Muslims. The attacks on America, Britain, France and elsewhere are designed to provoke exactly the racism, discrimination and war-mongering that leading political voices are falling into. Instead of combating ISIS, those responses help ISIS. So, what is an appropriate response? To explore and address why so many people across the world from all differing faiths continue to find violent readings of their tradition to be appropriate. That is a faith discussion, it's a religious discussion. An appropriate response would also be to decry as loudly as possible the racist and belligerent responses to these attacks.

This is not a time for discrimination. This is not a time to pretend that Syrians fleeing war pose a greater security threat than fundamentalist American Christians who want to bring about the End of Days. This is not a time to pretend that sometimes acts of terror do not have a religious basis. This is not a time to over-exaggerate fears of National Security to create a perpetual and self-serving climate of fear. This is not a time for a return to fascism. This is not a time for pointing fingers.

This is a time for self-reflection. This is a time for honest appraisal of our society. This is a time to ask why we are failing so many people to the point that they would choose poverty and death over luxury, liberty and life. This is a time to welcome the stranger, to assimilate outsiders, to share the wonders of our society and to break down social and religious barriers. This is a time to engage in honest interfaith dialogue. This is a time to openly denounce hatred, discrimination and racism. This is a time where we must ask why we continually care more about some victims of terror than others. This is a time for personal, communal, national and global change, not through war but through honest reflection and implementation of changes in the way we think, speak and act. That is an extremely different ideological war – one that demands commitment from all of us. We pray that God be with us in that war, the war to change ourselves and our society, and to help more people locally and globally, in our faith and in the faith of others, to come to a more tolerant understanding of God and thus of humanity. May such be God's will, and let us say, Amen.