



PARIS, JIHADISM AND THE BATTLE FOR HEARTS AND MINDS

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On Friday evening, 13 November, I switched on the TV to the BBC News channel only to see French riot police in Paris hunting terrorists after they had killed 129 people and injured 352.

As the weekend 14-15 November progressed, ISIS claimed responsibility for the evening's carnage on that Friday. Among other things the ISIS statement claimed to be targeting ...

“ ... the capital of prostitution and obscenity, the carrier of the banner of the cross [*i.e. the leading 'Crusader'*] in Europe — Paris. [*They also targeted*] the Bataclan Conference Centre, where hundreds of apostates had gathered in a profligate prostitution party, and other areas in the 10th and 11th and 18th [*arrondissements*] ... So Paris shook under their feet, and its streets were tight upon them, and the result of the attacks was the death of no less than 100 Crusaders and the wounding of more than those, and unto Allah is all praise and gratitude. [*And there were more threats for ...*] as long as they lead the convoy of the Crusader campaign, and dare to curse our Prophet (Allah's peace and blessings be upon him) [*i.e. presumably a reference to Charlie Hebdo, the satirical magazine*], and are proud of fighting Islam in France and striking the Muslims in the land of the Caliphate with their planes ... This attack is the first of the storm and a warning to those who wish to learn.”

French response

The following Monday, 16 November, the French President, M. Hollande, speaking to his country's congress, claimed “France is at war!” He said:

“These attacks were war. It was an attack against our values, against our youth and our way of life ... Since the beginning of the year, this organization [*ISIS*] has attacked Paris, Denmark, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Libya. Every single day they massacre and oppress people. That is the reason why we need to destroy ISIS ... On Thursday aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle will go to the Eastern Mediterranean, and that will treble our capacity for action ... Faced with acts of war committed on our territory, after the attacks in January [*on Charlie Hebdo*] and so many other crimes in the past few years in the name of this jihadist ideology, we must have no

pity. They're French people who, on Friday, killed other French people. In our country there are people who go from delinquency to radicalization to terrorism ... We want to respond with cold determination that's appropriate to this appalling attack. Our democracy has triumphed over far worse adversaries than these cowardly assassins."

But is all this simply a matter of going "from delinquency to radicalization to terrorism?" And will it be resolved by more intensive aerial bombardment of ISIS positions in Syria and Iraq?

Clearly Western governments have a duty to protect the lives and property of their citizens. This, according to the apostle Paul, is to enable each person to "lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way" (1 Tim 2.2); and Paul adds as an incentive for action and prayer the fact that "this is good [*something all people of goodwill recognize*] and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Saviour who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth [*something to encourage Christians*]" (1 Tim 2.3-4).

The Christian response

What, therefore, should the Christian response be to ISIS? Surely Christians should be concerned for justice *and* justification – for "the State in the use of the temporal sword against evildoers (Rom. 13:4) and ... the Church in the use of the sword of the Spirit [*i.e. the Bible*] against sin and death and the devil (Eph. 6.17)" to quote the ethicist and theologian Russell Moore. The State should execute justice in respect of violent individuals who destroy, rape, shoot and behead innocent people. The Church should pray and work for those individuals caught up in such horrendous activity to be converted to Jesus Christ and so justified by faith in the God who forgives through the Cross of Christ all types of sin. So the mission of the State and the mission of the Church are both necessary.

But the State must execute justice justly. That means any warlike activity must conform to the "just war" tradition, as worked out over Christian centuries. But one aspect of justice in war is that any necessary violence must have a good chance of success. Acts of blind vengeance that will not lead to success or are unnecessary are, therefore, wrong.

However, to be successful in the current situation, restraint or elimination of ISIS requires a proper understanding of the rise of modern Jihadism and so the

appeal of groups like ISIS – something the secularized (and sexualized) consciousness of many in the West finds very difficult. For, as we shall see, Jihadism is to be understood as religious extremism attacking secular extremism. And, as is being increasingly seen, the issues to be addressed are at the level of ideas and religious belief and not just in terms of the courts, the police and the armed forces – necessary and essential as they are.

The issues

The fundamental issue is that the modern world is not secularizing, as many thought. The standard Western belief was this: following the rise of science in the 17th century, then the 18th century age of atheistic or deist “enlightenment”, and then the 19th century industrial revolution and colonial expansion, the 20th century would see the demise of religion and the triumph of a truly godless, secular world order; and this would be ruled by all-knowing and all-wise philosopher scientists.

But since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the triumph of the liberal West, things have turned out very differently. True, Francis Fukuyama wrote in 1992 *The End of History and the Last Man* – with liberal democracy forming the Holy Grail that would produce health, wealth and happiness for everyone. So Europe could expect a new dawn of freedom and prosperity. But that confidence was short lived. For a cold dose of realism came in 1996 with Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. This book reflected the fact that reality was not producing this secular utopian dream. Far from religion declining, religion was growing in the new world order and particularly the appeal of “new assertive forms of religious activism and belonging” (Lamin Sanneh). That was because in the changes and challenges of modernity and urbanization, religion was providing people with stability and answers to life’s questions in a way modern secularism could not.

It is an interesting fact – to take just Christianity and Islam - that in 1900 the world population was 1.6 billion with Muslims 200 million and Christians 600 million, together 50% of the world’s population. In 1970 the world population was 3.7 billion with Muslims 600 million and Christians 1.2 billion, together 49% of the world’s population. But in 2013 with the world’s population now being 7.1 billion, Muslims were 1.6 billion and Christians 2.4 billion, together an increase to 56% of the world’s population. So as the West was becoming more secularized following the cultural, moral and spiritual revolution of the 1960s, far from the growth of the Church and Islam declining, both have grown worldwide. At the same time certainly the “liberal” elements in the

churches that have wanted to become secularized have declined, while the conservative elements have grown. All this has led to books with titles like *The Desecularization of the World – Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. As Peter Berger wrote in that book in 1999:

“if we really lived in a highly secularized world, then religious institutions could be expected to survive to the degree that they managed to adapt to secularity. That has been the empirical assumption of adaption strategies. What has in fact occurred is that, by and large, religious communities have survived and even flourished to the degree that they have *not* tried to adapt themselves to the alleged requirements of a secularized world.”

The exception

The great exception to this desecularizing trend is Western Europe together with a globalized band of intelligentsia, whose culture Berger describes as being carried ...

“ ... by a variety of vehicles: academic networks, foundations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), some governmental and intergovernmental agencies. It ... seeks to create markets throughout the world, but the products it promotes are not those of multinational corporations but the ideas and behaviours invented by Western (mostly American) intellectuals, such as the ideologies of human rights, feminism, environmentalism, and multiculturalism, as well as the politics and lifestyles that embody theses ideologies.”

The result of these developments is that the modern world is not secularized, but pluralized. This pluralization of ideas and beliefs comes through new electronic media as people are bombarded with a plethora of ideas and beliefs and through an education where religious texts are taught not to be believed as true or false but as poetry to be approached aesthetically. This leads to relativism, where nothing is true or right, but just a matter of preference. This then leads to reactions of various sorts, for relativism cannot be endured for long. Emile Durkheim was surely right when he said that a society cannot hold together without some common values (which he called the “collective conscience” of society). Otherwise morality, including marriage, sex and family ethics, becomes merely a matter of preference; and it is not subject to public argument or reason. So “might” becomes the only arbiter of what is right or

wrong and decided by who can shout the loudest or who has the best guns. Again to quote Berger:

“Relativism, with its individual rather than collective morality, is an invitation to nihilism. It can also be described as decadence – defined as a situation in which the norms that hold a society together have been hollowed out, have become illusionary and likely risible, and (most important) have undermined the trust that other people will behave in accordance with collectively shared norms. A decadent society doesn’t have much of a future: it lacks the will to defend itself even against very real dangers to its very existence.”

It is in the light of this “decadence” that violent Islamic extremism needs to be considered. The genealogy of modern Islamic extremism (or totalitarian Jihadism) goes back to the Wahabi movement of Arabia and the Mahdi movement in the Sudan (and the battle of Omdurman) in the late 19th century. These proto extremists or totalitarians were resisting what they considered the corruption of Islam by Shiites, Sufis and others, who were reckoned unfaithful to the traditions (the *sunna*) of the Prophet Mohammed. Their view, along with that of other conservative movements in other religions, was that, as James Davison Hunter puts it, “it was the degeneration of these faiths that had created conditions conducive to a foreign domination that only intensified the degradation of the faith and their cultures.”

Sayyid Qutb

But this Islamic extremism has only affected the West since the second half of the 20th century. Undoubtedly of great influence has been Sayyid Qutb, a Godfather of the current Islamic extremism. He was an Egyptian intellectual, who, as Hunter puts it, “more than anyone else, theorized the rationale for contemporary Islamic radicalism.” In his short book *Milestones* he summarizes his thinking. For example, Qutb wrote:

“Mankind today is on the brink of a precipice, not because of the danger of complete annihilation which is hanging over its head – this being just a symptom and not the real disease – but because humanity is devoid of those vital values which are necessary not only for its healthy development but also for its real progress. Even the Western world realizes that Western civilization is unable to present any healthy values for the guidance of mankind. It knows that it does not possess anything which will satisfy its own conscience and justify its

existence ... If we look at the sources and foundations of modern ways of living, it becomes clear that the whole world is steeped in Jahiliyya [i.e. *pagan ignorance of divine guidance*]; and all the marvellous material comforts and high-level inventions do not diminish this ignorance. This Jahiliyya is based on rebellion against God's sovereignty on earth; it transfers to man one of the greatest attributes of God, namely sovereignty, and makes some men lords over others. It is now not in that simple and primitive form of the ancient Jahiliyya, but takes the form of claiming that the right to create values, to legislate rules of collective behavior, and to choose any way of life rests with men, without regard to what God has prescribed. The result of this rebellion against the authority of God is the oppression of his creatures ... The Islamic civilization can take various forms in its material and organizational structure, but the principles and values on which it is based are eternal and unchangeable. These are: the worship of God alone, the foundation of human relationships on the belief in the Unity of God, the supremacy of the humanity of man over material things, the development of human values and the control of animalistic desires, respect for the family, the assumption of the vice-regency of God on earth according to his guidance and instruction, and in all affairs of this vice-regency, the rule of God's law [*al-Shari'a*] and the way of life prescribed by him ... ”

So when President Hollande said the attack of Friday, 13 November, “was an attack against our values ... and our way of life,” he was right. But the hard reality is that those French values and that French way of life no longer have the attraction they once had. This has to be understood to counter ISIS.

Undoubtedly, and sadly, on a Friday night in most major cities of the Western world, there will be many young people for whom the whole week has been endured because of that Friday night. That is when they can get, in the vernacular, “wasted”, or dance to decadent lyrics, or, for many, sleep with a person only just met. But at some point more and more are waking up the following morning thinking there must be something more to life than orgiastic experiences. And with many of the churches having “adapted” to the culture and no longer having a clear message, Qutb and his like have a ready hearing.

But while Qutb's analysis of Western decadence “rings bells”, his solutions are quite unacceptable. From his chapter on “*Jihad in the cause of God*” you can see how easily current extremists could justify their violence. So it may well be

that the young people who join Jihadist groups like ISIS, shocked by, or in numbing reaction to, the decadence of Western society, join only to find a hideous violence in their new “preference” they may not have expected.

The solution

Facts have to be faced. Islam is so varied. Many Muslims are truly horrified at what groups like ISIS say and do. Many are wanting radical changes in Islam; and many want to “adapt” Islam to the modern world. Christians will be cautious about such “adaptation” but, of course, support every attempt to change in a more peaceful direction; and they will pray that Muslims, who from the Quran, recognize Jesus as a prophet, will go on to the New Testament to learn about him more fully, and then trust him as the divine Saviour and Lord.

But a solution demands a change not only on the part of Islam but on the part of the West. The West has to insist that for all the pluralization of the modern world, truth questions must be (peacefully) addressed. For while all (or many) ideas and beliefs must be respected and tolerated, obviously not all ideas and beliefs are equally true. That, I am convinced, will mean the West and Europe in particular have to return to their Christian roots. So I will conclude with some words from the Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah, that are as relevant for today as they were centuries ago when, as today, people had spiritually lost their way:

“For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest everyone deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying ‘peace, peace’, when there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown,” says the Lord. *Thus says the Lord: “stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls”* (Jer 6.13-16).