

'Religious extremism'

A sermon preached by Nick Moir at St Andrew's Chesterton

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Where were you 15 years ago today? I was walking along the High Street in Waterbeach when someone told me I should go home and turn the telly on. And then I watched, along with millions of others, perhaps hundreds of times the pictures of that second aeroplane tower number 2 of the World Trade Centre. 9/11, the American emergency number and the date in the American order, marked the beginning in a new era of our history, triggered American-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the collapse of whatever stability there was in a number of Arab nations in North Africa and the Middle-East that has multiplied many-fold (perhaps a hundred-fold) the dreadful numbers killed on 9/11, and that was just four short of 3,000. Al Qaeda, the radical Islamicist terrorist group responsible for the 9/11 attacks has been significantly though by no means wholly neutralised, but a new, perhaps even more extreme, group has arisen in the form of ISIS, the so-called Islamic State. Over the summer they have conducted a series of terror attacks on the continent, particularly in France. Whilst our children returned to school this week to learn where their new classrooms and lockers were, I read that French children have been learning what to do in the event of a terrorist attack; 'how to hide, escape and help each other in the event of a terrorist assault'.

Their mouth is full of cursing and bitterness : their feet are swift to shed blood. Destruction and unhappiness is in their ways, and the way of peace have they not known.

So wrote the psalmist of the destructive forces of his day. But the agents of violence and mayhem were not inspired by religion, however misconceived. No, it was the godless: 'The fool hath said in his heart : There is no God.' (Psalm 14.1)

Oddly, the Islamic creed begins with the same words. The devout Muslim says 'There is no god... but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet'. And so in our day the principle villains of the peace and causers of destruction are not those who despise religion but those who most ardently embrace it.

So is it religion that's the problem? A lot of people think so, including John Lennon:

Imagine there's no countries

It isn't hard to do

Nothing to kill or die for

And no religion, too

Imagine all the people

Living life in peace

Religion has undoubtedly been a breeder of intolerance and at least a contributing factor to some of the world's bloodbaths and that certainly includes those acting in the name of Christianity – but the greatest breeding grounds for the killing fields of the last hundred years – Communism and Fascism - have been political ideologies that have been more or less avowedly atheist. We might also add Nationalism – a key factor in the first world war – linked with Capitalism and Imperialism, whose motivations have been principally secular.

Apart from Fascism the problem is not to do with either religious or political or philosophical ideologies – Communism, for instance, is a great idea or at least it might be. The problem isn't always what we believe but the way we believe it.

When I was a student I was a convinced and some would say zealous Christian. I thought you could get out of the fact that people were suspicious of religion and the wrong things done in its name by seeing that as a problem for everyone else. 'I'm not religious', I said. 'I'm a Christian.' - as though that exempted my own understanding of Christianity from the charges laid against religion and religious people. In my first year of University here in Cambridge the Christian Union held its triennial mission and the man coming to lead it was the world's most famous evangelist, Billy Graham. There was a lot of excitement around but also not all Christian groups and individuals were totally behind it. The week was called 'Reckon with God'; my college chaplain at the same time, who it's fair to say was not one of its enthusiastic supporters, held an open meeting called 'Reckon with Graham'. I went along and at one point lost my cool with those who were criticising it all. One of the chief anti students there came up to me afterwards and told me he had never seen such a religious zealot before; I don't think he meant it as a compliment. I don't think I really took his point at the time, but that incident stuck in my mind and gnawed away at me for years, and in some ways still does. I also remember – and it's interesting the things that do stick in your mind – I remember a poster that the chaplain had on his wall. On one side it had a load of protesters carrying placards that said 'Down with this' or 'Thou shalt not something else'; the people were in the shape of various nuts, brazils, walnuts, almonds and so on. They were looking rather dark and grim. On the other side, in vibrant colour, were people in the shape of bananas, pineapples and other jolly fruits. Underneath was the caption 'God wants spiritual fruits not religious nuts'. [Interesting that I googled the phrase to see if I could see an image of that poster but couldn't find it; instead I lots of photos of American churches with that slogan blazoned outside; they were saying, like I did, that the religious nuts are the ones who go to all the other places of worship down the road because 'we're not religious; we're Christians'.]

Which brings me to St Paul; he also looked back on his earlier days or religious ardour with a good deal of embarrassment – indeed, shame. 'I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence,' we heard earlier. Before his encounter with the risen Christ, remember that Paul, or Saul as he was known then, was a zealous persecutor of the church. He was involved in the killing of people he could not tolerate because they offended his religion. He was an ardent follower of his religion. We sometimes tell the story as though the problem was with his religion – his Judaism, but remember that according to our Bible that was all given by God. We Christians sometimes talk as though 1 year BC the religion of the Old Testament was just fine; the Law and the Prophets and the wisdom literature, the Temple, its sacrificial system, the pilgrim festivals – all of that was established by God and was great, but a year later, or 33 years later, suddenly it was all rubbish, second rate, worthless and misleading, because Judaism now counted for nothing as we had the only real, proper revealed religion, Christianity – or we say that it's not a religion at all because all religions are bogus and we have the real thing.

The problem with Saul wasn't his religion; as we've seen, all religions have their Sauls and all nationalisms, all ideologies have their Sauls. The problem with Saul wasn't his religion; the problem with Saul was Saul. Saul had to be changed; he had to become a new person, he had to be transformed right in the core of his being, he had to become Paul. Now it has to be said that some people don't like Paul very much; they think Paul has got a lot to answer for, corrupting the simple universal message of Jesus into a new and basically intolerant religion. I haven't got time to deconstruct all of that this morning but

even Paul would say that there was no doubt some of Saul still left in him; our baptism into Jesus Christ gives us a new name but we will only fully get there at the end. But consider this – Paul never used violence against others as Saul had done though he had no end of violence committed against him (stonings, beatings, lashings); Paul could argue hard, persuade hard, Paul could really hit on the nail, but he rarely if ever told people what to do; he appealed to people to do the right thing, but he didn't compel them.

Paul knew that religious fanaticism wasn't the answer. 'If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned' – I may become a martyr or a 9/11 suicide bomber – 'but have not love, I gain nothing.'

Now Islam is not Christianity and there are many things about Christ that we would love to share with our Muslim friends and there are many things I would love to learn from them. But the problem isn't Islam; the problem is people. Islam has no monopoly on religious or ideological fanatics and Christianity has no monopoly on love. So perhaps the wisest Christian response to terror attacks is not to assert Christian superiority but to model good ways of dealing with conflict and difference.