

Why Do Some Islamic Fundamentalists Hate America?

Personal reflections on religion and terrorism by Fr. Dave Heney

Islamic people seem inconsolable. Nothing seems to soothe hatred for Americans no matter what we do. The sheer fact of our existence seems to engender rage. Why is this? How can devout religious people support terrorist regimes like Libya and Iran or autocratic states like Saudi Arabia and Syria? How does Islam become connected to terrorism and why are so many Arabic Islamic people so poor? I am hopeful for a better future in the Middle East but I sense regret in Islam for a more glorious past that is gone.

Islam Past & Present

We can imagine the shock and awe felt by a people proud of their history and depressed at their present lot. Centuries ago a charismatic prophet rose up in the Middle East, received personal messages from God, foretold the future of his desert tribe, overcame tremendous opposition, and led his people to cultural greatness and even conquest. Eventually, the story was written in what later became known as a holy book, still read today by millions as a guide for daily life. The prophet attributed success to God's special blessings and favor. However, they gradually weakened and were conquered by far more powerful nations. Imagine their anguish; "How can we lose if favored and blessed by God? How could heathens conquer us?" Worse still, "Why are heathens in control of the world when they do not obey God?"

Ironically, that charismatic leader was Moses, but it could have been Mohammed as well, *for their stories are almost identical*. Like Mohammed, Moses led a desert people from weakness to remarkable political and artistic success in a new land that they attributed to the grace of God. However, they were soon invaded by heathen super-powers (Assyria and Babylon) and enslaved once again in a kind of cruel full circle. It was a massive shock to lose their freedom *again*. While captive in Babylon, (located ironically in modern Iraq) they reflected in deep sorrow how it all happened.

Similarly, Mohammed led a desert people in the 7th century to cultural success in Arabia, North Africa, and nearly all of Europe as well; all seen as a sign of God's favor. Arabic Islam inspired an advancing culture in art and science but slowly weakened until the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918. Today, many Arabic countries are a political and economic disaster; in a world increasingly democratic and prosperous. They rage at the loss of prestige and wonder why they are so often defeated and humiliated by the west. They ask how this can happen if they are blessed by God. Since Allah cannot be at fault, who is? *Worse still, how can it be that Americans who are "filled with drugs, sex, and crime" are so powerful?*

Both groups faced catastrophe but their responses differed greatly. The Israelite answer is in the bible stories of Adam and Eve, Cain, Abraham, and even Moses, whose troubles were the *results of their own selfishness*. Sin brings its own natural consequences. Israelites were conquered precisely because they greedily sought power and glory rather than justice, love, and life as a "light to the world" as called by God. In fact, prophets like Jeremiah saw super-power invaders as "agents" of God and a natural consequence of Israelite greed. Fortunately, the bible also reveals the Israelites learned the lesson of their selfishness and were released to return to Israel. Some in Arabic Islam, however, responded with radical fundamentalism.

Why Fundamentalism?

Fundamentalism may be a reaction to this kind of humiliating catastrophe. When people understand success as a *deserved* blessing from God but experience a decline, and then see heathen societies achieve power; they perceive everything is upside down. Fundamentalism provides an explanation for the loss of status as well as a means to regain it. *The loss is explained as a result of not following religion closely enough*. It describes a strict and unbending obedience to even the smallest rules to regain the success that is "deserved."

Ironically, fundamentalism became one of several Jewish responses in the time before Jesus when they were conquered again culturally and militarily by Greece and then Rome. The Pharisees were a group urging the strictest observance of religion as a means of regaining God's favor. They believed God would then remove the pagan Romans with a strong Moses-like leader. That was the "messiah" they were seeking when Jesus arrived. They could not understand why He resisted this strict observance. Recently, Protestant fundamentalism arose in the 1960's mainly in America as a response to an increasingly liberal and secular society. Ironi-

cally, it was the reverse for American Catholics, who experienced a kind of super strict obedience in the 1940's and 1950's as a reaction to earlier anti-Catholic prejudice but then an increase of status with the popularity of John F. Kennedy, Pope John XXIII, and the reforms of the Vatican Council.

Radical fundamentalists blame non-believers as scapegoats for problems. While Protestant or Jewish fundamentalism might have placed some blame on external forces as scapegoats, such as liberal society or Roman occupation, the emphasis usually remained internal reform and strict religious observance. Unfortunately, some radical Arabic Islamic leaders today greatly magnify the need for strict observance and place even more blame on powerful outsiders. For example, they perceive American or western material success as a kind of "messenger" of Arabic failure. They fan resentment rather than learning from other's success or engaging in honest self-appraisal. Their response is total religious obedience with no tolerance for non-believers who are "outsiders" and of little worth. Radicals add even more lethal ingredients.

Radical Fundamentalism and Terrorism

Several features distinguish radical Islamic fundamentalism from regular Islam, or even other fundamentalist movements. The first, and the worst, is the *sanction of violence toward outsiders*; merging hatred, terrorism, and targeting of civilians, with religion. Scapegoating makes it easy to kill the "other." A second feature is the *connection of terrorism with governments* such as Iran, Syria, and the former Iraq. When Islamic radicals have money, protection, and government support, their lethal effect is magnified. A third feature is the *autocratic role of a few Islamic clergy and dictators* especially in some Arabic countries. Many Arabic states are autocracies, which makes it easy for religious and political leaders to put citizens under radical fundamentalist ideas. While radical clerics and dictators demand total obedience, neither gets power through a system of accountability. Both simply assume power. The rage of radical clerics combined with the greed of politicians can hijack a nation for terrorism. Ordinary people cannot express grievances or contrary opinions so there is no openness, accountability, or responsibility in the system. Everyone remains stuck in selfish rage directed outwards.

Is there an answer?

I know many good people offer differing solutions. This deeply religious, political, and economic problem is complex but needs help fast. Our faith suggests the religious response remains what the Israelites recorded in the Bible. They rightly understood many of their problems as self-inflicted wounds caused by greed, selfishness, and pride. They did *not* scapegoat Assyrians or Babylonians. They did remember that their original covenant between God and Abraham called for a return to love of God and one another, and living in justice and peace as a "light to the gentiles." God called them to love not conquer. Anything else led to disaster, as Catholics have learned throughout history as well. Because Jesus Himself was wrongly made a scapegoat, we understand that every person is our brother or sister deserving respect. We can make no person a scapegoat.

Our faith suggests the political and economic answer is freedom. Democracy and capitalism, while not perfect, come closest to encouraging people with a *variety of beliefs and abilities* to free expression in political and economic activity. Each respects the dignity of all people and places the future in the hands of citizens and not religious or political autocrats. They encourage initiative, creativity, and ingenuity in personal expression, business activity, and solving social problems; just what is needed now. Democracy can prevent dictators from hijacking a country and responsible free enterprise can increase wealth. This freedom is much deeper than "western" culture (or any culture) because it is rooted in our God-given human nature, as Indonesia, the largest Islamic country proves today, and such diverse places as Japan, Germany, and the former Soviet Union found in their own reconstruction. Responsible freedom is a universal human desire and need.

The real battle in the world today is *within* Islam, not between Islam and the west. The biblical story of Israel is the true lesson on how loss occurs and real and lasting glory attained. If there is to be peace in the world, Islamic people must look honestly within their own borders and free their people and the world from political and religious totalitarianism. That truth will set us all free.

-Fr. Dave Heney

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daveheney@stpascal.org

Sources: *Sacred Rage*, Robin Wright, Touchstone Books, 2001, *What Went Wrong*, Bernard Lewis, Harperperennial, 2003, *Dream Palace of the Arabs* by Fouad Ajami, Vintage Books, 1999, *Crisis of Islam*, Bernard Lewis, Modern Library, 2003, *The Arab Mind*, Raphael Patai, Heatherleigh, 2001, *Longitudes and Attitudes*, Thomas L. Friedman, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002