

THE "ISLAM = TERROR" LIBEL

Americans are in the grip of hysteria – once again. First was the panic provoked by the atrocity of 9/11. The symptoms of that Post-Traumatic Shock are still with us. Now comes the panic in the aftermath of San Bernadino and the Paris shootings. This time, the slandering of Islam as a uniquely violent and repressive religion is overt and widespread – as witness the ugly language of Republican presidential hopefuls. Bigotry and lawlessness are sweeping across the land. The latter category includes the illicit declarations of state governors that they will not permit persons from Syria who are Muslim to enter their territory. President Obama characteristically has been restrained and formalistic in reacting to this affront to American principles. Emotions are aflame; sober thinking is invisible.

Putting some emotional distance between ourselves and the events in Paris, it is hard to see any objective change between the threat today and what was on November 12. After all, we all knew that this sort of incident could happen and would happen sooner or later. It has antecedents: London, Madrid, Charlie Hebdo. They all were carried out by locals with, perhaps, the partial exception of Madrid. They all did have external connections but there is no evidence that there is a central command (a General Staff or Morgan Chase Executive Committee) plotting and directing campaigns. It's diffuse motives meeting opportunity and means.*

The puzzle for me is the discrepancy between the formidable capabilities of the terrorists groups and the very limited operations that they have conducted in the West. As to plots foiled, in the US we can infer that there have been none of consequence since even the most insignificant (usually hatched by the FBI) is played up and its importance exaggerated. The optimistic conclusion is that the risk is not that great. The pessimistic conclusion is that if these guys ever get their act together we're in real trouble - since there really is no defense.

One hypothesis in favor of the former is that there are in fact very few candidates in the West for taking on suicidal missions. Were those attracted to ISIL truly fanatical believers, wouldn't that number be much higher? By contrast, if they are mainly thrill-seekers, borderline sociopaths, and sexually repressed teen-agers excited by the prospect of sex slaves and/or an alternative outlet for their raging hormones - then it is understandable that they would lack the fortitude and conviction to kill and to be killed. This is especially true in their home country, banal Western settings where there is not the intense emotional encouragement and example of their salafist fellows.

That may help to explain why the two earlier mass killings in the US (Dr. Nadal Hussain and the Tsarnaev brothers) were by people who exhibited relatively little religious passion or in-depth knowledge of scripture. Dr. Hassan, in the years leading up to the incident, had received tutoring in Islam . It should be borne in mind, however, that he has affirmed that his motivation was political (US actions in the Middle East) rather than religious in the sense that his action conformed to the requirements of Islam. In addition, his chosen response of killing was not at all a stipulation of Scripture or his obligation as a Muslim (unlike ISIL)

The Tsarnaevs, for their part, were close to illiterate on matters of Islamic scripture. The same holds for the French born Paris terrorists. They seem closer to the nihilistic mass killers who have murdered many more in schools, theaters and post offices. What they seem to share is an emotional emptiness, a void where souls are supposed to reside. One can't but wonder how much of this derives from immersion in the video game/disengaged/virtual culture that is contemporary society's hallmark. An artificial universe devoid of emotion, feeling and thought.

Caution is in order when ascribing to a religion's theology and doctrines a unique potential for instigating dramatic, sociopathic behavior. True, not all religions are the same. But Islam, Christianity and Judaism are first cousins; they share the same eschatology, each successive version of the same narrative accepts the validity of its antecedent prophets' claims. Daqib, the Islamic apocalypse/Day of Judgment is almost identical to Christianity's Armageddon as viewed by believers in the Book of Revelations. Indeed, it is forecast that Daqib will be announced by a Second Coming of Jesus Christ. There are millions here in

this state of Texas who are prepared to embrace it right now - or at least when football season ends.

As to what Islam preaches about violence, we should bear in mind both the contradictory passages of the Koran and the contradictions in its antecedent scriptures. After all, Muslims recognize Moses and Jesus as God's prophets. The Old Testament and the New Testament alike are valid expressions of the Divine – albeit superseded by Mohammed's transmission of Allah's word. Hence, they implicitly accept that Yahweh instructed Joshua to kill every living being in Jericho including babies (*Deuteronomy*). They also implicitly accept Jesus' pacifist preachings. As for Christians, they have been far more comfortable with the Old Testament God Yahweh than the New Testament Jesus on matters of coercion and violence – as demonstrated by 2,000 years of history. The proposition, therefore, that Islam conveys a creed of violence unique among the three monotheistic religions is absurd.

The Christian Right are our politicized Christian Salafists. Only a few, thank goodness, have taken to violence. Then again, there are centuries of enlightenment history and acculturation in a genuine humanism between them and the earlier ages when Christians rampaged in a manner little different from what we see emergent in the Islamic world today. The underlying worldview and mentality are there. Indeed, at one time Christians performed deeds little different from those of ISII – amazingly with the explicit blessing of Augustine of Hippo.

Well documented Church history tells us that Augustine personally incited zealous monks who cut a swath across North Africa and the East destroying pagan temples, terrorizing *Donatists*, crushing the remnants of Gnostic communities and burning synagogues. Flying squads of black clad mad monks swept through targeted districts – intoxicated by their own incessant loud chanting. The calculated aim was to win converts by displays of power and militancy that intimidated the populace. Agitation and coercion were the methods. Augustine, in his institutional capacity, promoted these nasty forays to extend the "Charity of Christ," i.e. boost the number of converts. That was the principal, political basis for his "just war" theory – not defensive response to an inter-state threat. Encouraging a campaign of violence hopefully would create "facts on the ground" that could serve as a bulwark against any successor to the apostate Emperor Julian who might threaten the Christian Dominion – however far it had strayed

from Christ. Augustine wrote: "I would not have believed the Gospel had not the authority of the Church moved me". (*Contra Epistulam Fundamentic*. 410 ch.5) It therefore was crucial that the campaign have the authority of, and strengthen the Church. Those glaze-eyed, foaming-at-the-mouth fanatics were actually "Ye of little faith" whose visionary prospects for the City of God could not dissolve their fears about another City of Julian challenging Christianity's status as the Empire's official religion. The Church as temporal power as well as spiritual power was their Caliphate – not to be rendered to some other Caesar. Since Jesus' prophecy of the imminent Day of Judgment had not come to pass, the here-and-now had become inseparable from the Hereafter. Establishment of a Christian Caliphate is the stated goal of today's American *Dominionists* – one of whose pastoral leaders is Ted Cruz's father. The defining concept of *Dominionism* is "that Christians alone are Biblically mandated to occupy all secular institutions until Christ returns"

Augustine, possessing the mind of a shrewd political strategist – among other attributes, understood that securing the power of the state to instruct and to coerce was crucial for the Church's long-term success. Sound familiar?

There is a benefit to examining this aspect of Augustine: it provides us insight into the jihadist mentality, nowadays mainly of an Islamist character, that jeopardizes civilization today.

San Bernadino

Here is an unconventional perspective - one that I expect will irk a number of people. It begins with a formulation of the "problem" that diverges from that, or those, currently used. Without disparaging the importance of Islamist terrorism or terrorist organizations, one might examine it from an American

national perspective that sees it as only one of a variety of phenomena we could call anomic violence. That is to say: the "problem" over here is the frequency of mass killings in the United States which target innocent persons - usually at random, occasionally as a designated cause of grievance (e.g. disgruntled worker syndrome.)

Subsumed under this broad category are Islamist terrorists (Hassan, Tsarnaev brothers, Farooq/Malik); religious crackpots (Timothy McVeigh), the anti-abortion fanatic (Dear) and the nihilists (Colombine, Sandy Hook); and others. I believe that we should look at them as an ensemble. The common denominator is that all of these perpetrators arise from (are products of) a society that is warped in ways that are conducive to persons - variously motivated - expressing their emotions in violent acts. Those warped ways are numerous. They include, to my mind, an abnormal degree of individual estrangement from the institutions that structure and order behavior, a blurring of the boundaries between virtual realities and actual ones (see electronic communications among other things), cultivation of a narcissistic ethos with its implied message that "anything goes," innumerable models of egomaniacal/violent behavior in reality shows, entertainment, video games, and the behavior of public figures (usually verbal).

In short, this is a social environment that enables - and, in some respect, actually encourages - violence. The proximate causes that can lead to any particular act of violence are numerous and diverse - Islamic radicalization being one of them. Certain types of emotional unstable personalities already inclined to act violently are living in circumstances that make it psychologically easier to overcome inhibitions.

Here's an analogy. War is a feature of international life primarily because international society has no structures that can set and enforce rules. Conflict situations, therefore, are ubiquitous. Any particular conflict has identifiable

specific causes but the overriding truth is the absence of mechanisms to avoid organized violence among societies. There also are patterns at times in some places, e.g. the balance-of-power wars among professional armies in 18th century Europe. But those are temporary and partial (as is Islamic violence today).

I am not sure where this leads us in policy terms. However, I believe that a formulation of this kind could help us to avoid being trapped in simplistic, misleading definitions of the "problem" and counter-productive actions that flow from them.

*We should remind ourselves that contemporary suicide bombing was inaugurated by Hindu Tamils in Sri Lanka rebelling against the predominantly Sinhalese government. It was a strictly ethnic-nationalist movement with few if any religious overtones. The Tamil Tigers carried out 378 suicide bombings. For those devoted believers in the touching idea that diversity is the answer to all our woes, note that 104 of them were by women – including the young woman who killed Rajiv Gandhi in Madras. Admittedly, those figures indicate that parity was not achieved – as doubtless The New York Times editorial board will find occasion to point out.