

Islamic Voices of Outrage at Terrorism

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Andrew Carey's article (24th October) echoes Margaret Thatcher, who famously remarked that she had not heard enough condemnation of September 11th 'from Muslim priests (!)'. In Leicester I work closely with the kind of moderate Muslim leaders that Andrew Carey says have remained muted about terrorism. We work together in Leicester Council of Faiths, now over twenty years old, in a Faith Leaders Forum which has met regularly since September 11th, and in a Dialogue group now in its third year. This has pledged to raise funds in Ramadan and Advent, for a Christian hospital in Gaza commended by Archbishop Carey, and a Muslim administered project in Kosovo.

I showed the article to my friends and was sad that Muslim leaders should find themselves upset by remarks in a leading Anglican paper. Suleman Nagdi, a JP who recently received the MBE, remarked, 'The author has obviously failed to attend any of the vigils and prayers, up and down the country, to honour the victims of terrorism. He is reinforcing the Islamophobic attitudes promulgated by some of the mainstream press.'

Here are three other local responses. Sheikh Ibrahim Mogra, a young Imam increasingly recognised as a national leader, comments, 'I do not know what more we can do to convince a writer like Andrew Carey that we are against terrorism. But we also have every right to defend our faith against the likes of Jerry Falwell. Every faith has the right to defend itself when attacked, and Muslims would support them in doing so. But no mainstream leader in Britain has ever condemned such individuals to death. Freedom of expression for the majority community in any part of the world at the expense of minority communities is totally unacceptable.'

Dr. Ataullah Siddiqui, Senior Lecture in Pluralism at Markfield Islamic Institute, Leicestershire, said, 'I am dismayed to see that Andrew Carey has not heard the Muslims' chorus of 'no' to terrorism, which, is indeed, often committed by Muslim governments against their own people. In Pakistan a few years ago Muslims were killed in a mosque during Ramadan while at prayer. More recently Christians were killed while attending Sunday worship. For me these were equally heinous crimes against humanity. Somehow we Muslims seem to be expected to share guilt for an act of terror committed by someone bearing a Muslim name, in a way that does not happen to the Christian community, or to the Buddhists after the subway deaths in Tokyo. Mr Carey says that debate is being stifled about peace and jihad. This shows he has not heard the debate going on within the community about human rights, minorities, conversion, peace, justice and human dignity.'

Naila Ahmed is head of RE in a voluntary aided church secondary school and co-leader of a Muslim-Christian Women's Group. She comments, 'Religion is only 'newsworthy' when bad things happen. Muslim clerics condemning violent acts rarely make the news. All movements, whether political, economic or religious, contain extreme

factions, and as long as the media continues to give such minority groups a platform, more liberal, rational followers of any movement will not be heard. A few Muslims are involved in violence and aggression, yet there are also world leaders doing similar things under the name of 'democracy.'

There are of course exceptions to this. The Sun played a lead in proclaiming that Islam is not evil, and should not be judged by its extremists alone. The Mail printed an article by Manzoor Moghal, Chairman of the Federation of Muslim Organisations in Leicestershire, and a significant local and national figure, which condemned extremism in totally unambiguous terms. Not only did he write that there can never be any rationale for the appallingly barbaric attack on the Twin Towers, but also he slated the brutal offensiveness of the Al Muhajiroun extremists and their sick fanaticism that leads them to regard mass murder as somehow a triumph for Islam.

The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) recently published a fascinating book of reflections on September 11th entitled *The Quest for Sanity*. It could not be more unambiguous in condemning what happened that day as 'simply evil and criminal.' It quotes its own statement soon after September 11th, 'The perpetrators of these atrocities, regardless of their religious, ideological or political beliefs, stand outside the pale of civilised values.' For those who simplistically equate Islam with terrorism, they quote the Qur'an on the sanctity of life, 'Whoever takes an innocent life, it is as if he had killed the whole of humanity, and whoever saves one life, it is as if he has saved the whole of humanity.' (5.32). They call on British Muslims to dispel stereotypes and to communicate with neighbours and other faith groups. Urging them not to retaliate against abusive behaviour, they published a Social Contract, calling on British Muslims to be 'faithful to the Islamic values of truth, justice, care and compassion, and to follow the Qur'anic instruction, 'When ignorant people address you, worshippers of God Most Gracious reply, Peace,'

The same publication has a chapter on condemnations of terror by Muslim scholars worldwide. These include the head of Saudi Arabia's judiciary, Sheikh Salih al-Lahidan, who said, 'The crimes that occurred in America are no doubt among the most dangerous criminal acts which Islam in no way agrees with and it is not possible for anyone to condone. It is an abomination.' Similar statements are quoted in full from the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, from Professor Khurshid Ahmad, Vice-President of Pakistan's Jamaat-e-Islami, the Grand Imam of Cairo's world famous al-Azhar mosque, from 100 Islamic political leaders from all around the Islamic world, from Ayataullah Fadallah from Lebanon, from Ayatullah Ali Khamenei of Iran. The renowned scholar Shaikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi called for Muslims to give blood to the victims. President Khatemi of Iran and a religious scholar in his own right, said in New York, in the Cathedral of St John the Divine, in November, 'What we are witnessing in the world today is an active form of nihilism in social and political realms ... vicious terrorists who concoct weapons out of religion are superficial literalists clinging to simplistic ideas.'

What of other acts of terrorism since September 11th? The article suggests that voices were not raised against the abominable killing of Christians in Pakistan. Condemnation was articulated clearly by Muslim political and religious leaders within Pakistan. In Leicester, a moving e mail was sent to the Bishop from a senior Muslim

leader expressing his personal anguish. Suleman enabled such a message to be published in the Leicester Mercury and received several letters of appreciation from local clergy.

When the Bali atrocity happened, Suleman proposed to our dialogue group the following resolution, adopted unanimously, and made public on local radio and in the press. He declined the suggestion of a Christian that the statement should be linked with Iraq, not wanting the condemnation to be relativised:

As Muslims and Christians we are united in expressing our shock at the bombing and our utter disgust at the mindset of those who perpetrated it. There can be no excuse for such an evil act, and we hope very much that those responsible will be brought to justice as soon as possible.'

This does not mean that there are not Muslim voices, often highlighted by the media, which support insupportable acts. Fortunately there are few amongst the leadership in Britain at least. What helps their cause are mindless attacks on Islam as a terrorist religion, going along with a lack of critique about western strategic policies which suggest that there is a right of intervention anywhere, any place, which can be portrayed as 'state terrorism', and be equated with the policies seen recently in Israel, or threatened repeatedly in Iraq. Robert Fisk wrote in the Independent, on 8th November 2001, 'If the US attacks were an assault on 'civilisation', why shouldn't Muslims regard the Afghanistan attack as a war on Islam.' It can appear that weapons of mass destruction are ok, if they are in 'Christian' hands. The MCB book quotes figures from the Encyclopaedia Britannica, showing how the twentieth century was the most terrible in history, with nearly 163 million people dying in wars. Apart from the Iran-Iraq war, when one million people died, almost none of these wars were ones where Muslims were the primary perpetrators; they were often amongst the victims of the wars of western powers.

It is not easy to stand up against extremists, as moderate Christian leaders have found over the years in Northern Ireland. It has been our task there to encourage and strengthen those who do. We should do the same for moderate Muslim leaders. To do this has been a special gift that Archbishop George Carey bequeathed from his last years in leadership of the Church of England, when he took many initiatives in this direction. Let us continue to carry on that good work. We are grateful to the CEN for giving us this space.

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