

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

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The recent attacks in Brussels were originally planned, it seems, for Easter. The symbolism is obvious: as Christians celebrated Easter with its promise of new life, they would have been surrounded by death. And the contrast between the celebration of life and the cult of death goes to the heart of the present global struggle. Reaching back to a hadith (saying) of Prophet Mohammed, Osama bin Laden himself made that clear in 1996 when he wrote, in a manifesto addressed to then US defence secretary William Cohen, that "what I must tell you, Bill, is that our youth cherishes death as much as yours values life".

Amedy Coulibaly, who seized the kosher supermarket in the Porte de Vincennes area of Paris immediately after the attack on Charlie Hebdo, repeated the message. "The difference between we Muslims and you Jews," Coulibaly, who had spent many hours studying Islam, told his victims before slaughtering them, "is that you hold life sacred. Our sacredness lies in death." Nor was Coulibaly at all unusual. "Understand this," Mohamed Merah, who murdered three soldiers and several Jews, including an eight-year old girl, declared to the police during the siege in Toulouse that cost him his life, "death, for me, will be as sweet as life is for you." And the same grotesque warning resurfaced at Kenya's Garissa University, on Maundy Thursday of last year. "You love life," the jihadis proclaimed as they butchered the students who could not recite verses from the Koran, "but we don't fear death: it would make an excellent Easter vacation."

It would be easy to dismiss these calls as the ravings of lunatics, disconnected from the religion they claim to follow. We live, after all, in a secular age that treats faith, or its absence, as a mere matter of taste, incidental to the great life choices. Whatever relevance faith has is viewed as a residue, destined to melt away as the entire world becomes modern. Far from being guided by their beliefs, those who say they act in faith's name are, in Karl Marx's phrase, simply "expressing" their alienation. Let these madmen invoke Allah, polite society therefore tells us: they know not what they say. Their real motivation lies elsewhere - in discrimination hardship, or the chaos in the Middle East. As for their religion, it can be no better or worse than any other, just as chocolate ice cream is no better or worse than vanilla.

But those homilies are scarcely credible. The problem is not simply that they gloss over what is happening in Islam: the fact that, as the great Tunisian writer Abdelwahab Meddeb put it shortly before his death in 2014: "If Nazism was the German pathology, so fundamentalism is Islam's disease." Nor is it just that they evoke the repulsion Hannah Arendt, in the preface to *Men in Dark Times*, expressed for "exhortations that, under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality". Rather, it is that they miss the reality that instead of vanishing as the secularists predicted, faith is reshaping the world. And instead of being in retreat, Christianity, which the secularists slated for extinction, is more vibrant than ever before, with its spread precipitating reactions worldwide.

The trend is easily missed, but its implications are momentous, notably in the global south. The developing world had about 90 million Christians in 1900; now there are more than 1.3 billion, accounting for 60 per cent of the world's Christian population. Moreover, as the number of Christians is rising, so the composition of the Christian population is changing, away from traditional denominations towards smaller, more expressive churches that spring up in both the well-paved suburbs and the teeming slums of the south's new megacities, channelling their passions of the heart and thoughts of the mind. Rarely has a conquest been generally so peaceful. In Latin America, for example, there were barely 10 million Pentecostals in the early 1950s; by 2000, there were 140 million, with more than 45 per cent of the Brazilian adult population self-identifying as Pentecostal or Charismatic.

Yet far from inducing sectarian violence, Protestant evangelism has revitalised the Catholic Church and entrenched democracy. However, the response has been anything but peaceful in the Muslim world. On the contrary, in those countries where Islam is the official religion, ever greater restrictions have been imposed on proselytising, conversion and Christian worship: in Pakistan, for example, convictions and executions for blasphemy and apostasy increased fivefold after 2000, often targeting Christians. And in sub-Saharan Africa, where Islam and an immense array of Christian churches compete, violence against Christians has become endemic, as Islam retreats into the hatred that is also fuelling the genocide of Christians in the Arab Middle East.

That battle will not let up. Rather, as the Christian population grows, so does the number of Christian missionaries, with the majority now coming from and going to the global south. And Islam, faced with their message of peace, is only sliding further into the fanaticism that has so harmed it in the past half-century. Unable to meet the aspirations of its people, the promise Islam offers is all too often metastasising into that of an apocalyptic clash with the unbelievers, which instead of hoping to heal the world vows to end it. None of that will worry the politicians who refuse to see what they see. Their reluctance is understandable: it is much less troubling to deny facts than to acknowledge that we don't know how to deal with them. Yet as faith in life clashes with the glorification of death, that is the world we're in. Let's find the courage to say so and not back away from the fact.

Source: Australian Prayer Network