

THIS WAR IS ABOUT RELIGION, AND CANNOT BE WON WITHOUT IT

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The sooner we face facts, the more powerful our chances to succeed in making religious terrorism a temporary phenomenon of human culture. But we cannot do this if we hide our heads in the sand. Politically incorrect or not, this war is about religion. In case anyone thinks that it is not about religion then they should take a good hard look at the document written by the terrorist mastermind of the World Trade Center bombing, Mohammed Atta, in order to help his soldiers prepare for their sanctified deaths. It is one of the most profound religious documents I have ever seen, and its preparation for a beautiful death and afterlife is so compelling that I almost forgot, as I read it transfixed, that it was really about mass murder. I felt tempted to join the journey myself. If I felt tempted as a non-Muslim, how much more tempting to tens of millions of alienated young Muslim men in search of significant lives and meaningful deaths. This death wish is a careful weaving of purification rituals to be accepted into Paradise, including asking God for forgiveness of sins! Mass murder is, of course, not one of the sins in this unique reading of Islam. It is, on the contrary, a supreme religious act of struggle with the forces of evil. But the atrocity is not even mentioned by name. It is simply the struggle with evil. In fact, it is overshadowed in the letter by the holy rituals of death preparations, as if a meditative concentration on Paradise is at the core of every act leading to the end, rather than revenge or murder.

The fact that terrorism and suicide terrorism defy many traditional laws of Islam regarding proper conduct during warfare is beside the point. The fact is that in the lived experience of thousands of people who have been on streets across the world screaming Osama Bin Laden's name in adulation, this was not an atrocity but a

religious act. And they have many a cleric who have told them so. Shame on those clerics for betraying the better principles of Islam, as well universal principles of justice and compassion, but the fact is that they have. In the lived experience of their religion this is a righteous act. They also may be a minority of the Muslims in the world, but they are numerous enough and determined enough to wreak havoc on our civilization, as well as on their own civilizations.

What is to be done? Counter-terrorism? Massive development and poverty alleviation efforts for the Middle East? A complete revamping of relationships to regimes that keep most people absurdly poor in the Middle East? The answer is a resounding yes to all of these efforts! Are they enough? No. The reason is simple. You cannot change hearts and minds in the long run with threats and counter-aggression. And you cannot buy off an ideology with jobs and money. You certainly can make the good life more tempting and more attainable for millions more people. And we must do that. But this barbaric ideology, this cruel nadir of some people's Islam is a phenomenon that must be fought in its own backyard. The offensive must be taken against the barbarity of Islamicism as opposed to Islamic religion and high culture. And no one can do this but Muslims themselves.

The time has come for a war for the soul of Islam. We cannot wait for an Islamic Reformation to evolve historically, with a new set of higher institutions and training centers for clerics. We must have it now. Just as there needs to be a generous Marshall plan for the Middle East that focuses on millions of jobs and economic viability beyond petro-dollars, so too do we need a Marshall plan of religious freedom and pluralism. The thousands of Muslims who have toiled quietly, and sometimes not so quietly, for Islamic democracy, religious tolerance, human rights, women's rights, and the pursuit of peace and social justice, must be given the strength and security that they deserve. They should not have to live behind the shadow of repressive regimes and even more repressive terrorist networks. We must see to it that they are given the pre-eminent voice that they deserve.

The other two Abrahamic faiths, Judaism and Christianity, had to face many traumas of surviving the secularizing modern world for a couple of hundred years. In particular, they had to experience the trauma of being marginalized in terms of temporal authority. In the long run, they flourished anyway. But the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the scourge of the Holocaust, made Christendom understand that democracy and human rights brought a cleansing of religious institutions rather than their vitiation. And Eastern European Christianities emerging only now from behind the Iron Curtain are beginning to see this as well.

Most Jews get this, but the religious parties in Israel still do not. Neither do those

Christian fundamentalists in the United States who would rather repeat the terrible mistakes of Christian history. But the majority in these traditions have understood that skyscrapers, and capitalism, and numerous religions side by side, and even MTV, do not have to spell the end of their religion. But Bin Laden and his supporters do not understand. They are like the fascist religious parties of Europe of the 1930's who made a deal with devils for the sake of their own pitiful, last grab for power.

Technology and intolerant religious power create a chemistry that human civilization cannot survive. American Muslims by and large know this well. So do millions of other Muslims around the world. We need them to convince the others, and fast. They can by making common cause with the rest of us, struggling with us over how our policies can help this process, but also acknowledging to us the internal changes that they seek. Together we can win this. We owe that much to the 7000 human beings whose deaths have cast a shadow of responsibility over our collective state of mind, indeed, over our very lives.