

Why Do Radical Islamic People Hate America?

Personal reflections by Fr. Dave Heney

Nothing seems to stop hatred for Americans no matter what we do. Why is this? Why do some devout Muslims support terrorist groups and oppose the US? How did Islam become connected to terrorism and why are so many Islamic Arab people so desperately poor? I am hopeful for a better future in the Middle East, where I visit every year, but I sense a kind of regret within 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 but 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 opposition, and led his people to cultural greatness. 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. That prophet attributed success to God's special blessings and favor. However, the people gradually weakened and were conquered by far more powerful nations. Imagine their anguish; "How can we lose if we are 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 was Mohammed as well, *for their stories are almost identical*. Like Mohammed, Moses led a desert people from weakness to great political success in a new land that they attributed to the grace of God. However, they were soon invaded by pagan super-powers (Assyria & Babylon) and enslaved once again in a cruel full circle. It was a shock to lose their freedom *again*. While captive in Babylon, (modern Iraq) they reflected in deep sorrow how it all happened.

Similarly, Mohammed led desert tribes in the 7th century in conquest and cultural success in Arabia, North Africa, and years later, his successors in nearly all of Europe as well; all seen as from God's favor. Arabic Islam inspired an advanced culture in art and science but then weakened until the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, and division into western controlled states. Despite independence today, many Arabic states are political and economic disasters in a world increasingly democratic and wealthy. Arabs rage at this loss and why they are so often humiliated by the West. They ask how this can happen if they are favored by God? Since Allah is not at fault, who is? *Worse still, why is it that Americans and Europeans who are so "filled with drugs, sex, and crime" remain so powerful?*

Both groups faced catastrophe but their responses differed greatly. The Israelite answer is the bible story of Adam and Eve, Abraham, and even Moses, whose troubles were the *result of their own selfishness*. Israelites were conquered precisely because they selfishly sought power and glory, rather than justice and love as a "light to the world" as they were called by God to be. Sin brings its own natural consequences. Prophets like Jeremiah saw super-power invaders as "agents" of God and natural consequences of Israelite greed. Fortunately, the bible also reveals the Israelites learned the lesson of their selfishness, changed their ways, and were released to return to Israel. However, some in Islam have responded with a radical fundamentalism.

Why Radical Fundamentalism?

Radical Fundamentalism may be a reaction to this kind of humiliating catastrophe. When people understand success as *deserved* 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 the result of not following religion closely enough*. It offers 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 by Greece and later by Rome. The Pharisees were a group urging the strictest religious observance as a means of regaining God's favor. They believed God would then remove the Romans with a strong Moses-like leader. That was the "messiah" they were seeking when Jesus arrived. (They never did understand why Jesus 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. Ironically, it was the reverse for American Catholics, who experienced a 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 Vatican Council II.

Islamic Fundamentalists today blame "heathen societies" (the West) as scapegoats for their problems. While Protestant or Jewish fundamentalists might have once blamed external forces, such as liberal society or Roman occupation, they usually focused more on *internal reform* of religious observance. However, many Radical Islamic leaders today magnify both strict religious observance and *external blame* on powerful outsiders. For example, they consider American commercial success as a "cause" of Arabic failure, as if global wealth were a zero-sum game. They fan Arab resentment rather than learn from another's success or engage in honest self-examination. Their answer is total religious obedience with no tolerance for non-Muslims.

Islam, Fundamentalism, & Terrorism

Islam has two main sources, the *Quran*, which Muslims believe was dictated to Mohammed by God, and the *Hadiths*, which are the more obscure words and deeds of Mohammed himself recorded years later. Fundamentalists interpret both *in the most radical ways*.

The **first**, and worst, is the *religious sanction of violence toward outsiders*; merging terrorism against innocent civilians with Islam. Scapegoating also makes killing "outsiders" easier. Moreover, Radical Islam becomes divorced from reason, as there is no reasoning with those who believe God calls them to kill. **Second** is the *connection of terrorism with States*, such as Iran in 1979 with Ayatollah Khomeini. When Islamic Radicals have State support, their lethal effect is magnified. **Third** is the *autocratic role of Radical clergy and dictators* who can forcefully place citizens under Radical Islamist ideas. While radical clerics and dictators demand total obedience, they rarely achieve power through real voting, but more often the pretense elections, as again in Iran in 2009. The rage of radical clerics combined with the greed of politicians can hijack a nation for terrorism. Ordinary Arab people can't express grievances or dissent so there is no openness, accountability, or responsibility. **Fourth** is the split of Islam into Shia and Sunni factions that each believes is the true legacy of Mohammed. Both consider the other as heretics and worthy of death. Islam today both rages against outsiders and rages within itself with Shia and Sunni violence.

Is there an answer?

Many good people offer solutions today, but this deeply religious, political, and economic problem is complex. Our Catholic response remains what the

Israelites wrote in the Bible. They understood 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 with God called for love of God and one another, and living in justice and peace as a "light to the world." *God called them to love not conquer*. Anything else led to disaster, as Catholics have had to learn the hard way. We have a unique credibility to foster respect, reason, and love, learned from our history when we did not do those 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, and religion can never be an excuse for violence.

Our faith proposes freedom as the answer. **Democracy**, **Free Enterprise**, and the **Rule of Law**, while not perfect, come closest to enabling people with a *variety of beliefs and abilities* to free expression in religious, political and economic activity. This system respects the dignity and safety of all people, especially those with whom we disagree, and places the future in the hands of citizens; not religious or political autocrats. Democracy, Free Enterprise, and the Rule of Law, encourage and protect creativity and ingenuity in personal expression, business activity, and solving social problems. Democracy and the Rule of Law can prevent dictators from hijacking a country and responsibly regulated Free Enterprise can increase wealth.

This freedom is deeper than "western" culture (*or any culture*) because it is rooted in our God-given human nature, as Turkey and Indonesia, both large Islamic countries prove today, and diverse states as Japan, Germany, and the former Soviet Union found in their own reconstruction. Even China and India have found immense prosperity on this road. Radical Islamic leaders can take this same road, or lead their poor people into even more immense poverty and suffering.

The real battle 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.

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Sources: *Sacred Rage* by Robin Wright, *What Went Wrong?* by Bernard Lewis, *Dream Palace of the Arabs* by Fouad Ajami, *The Crisis of Islam* by Bernard Lewis, *The Arab Mind* by Raphael Patai, *Islam Without Extremes*, by Mustafa Akyol, *After the Prophet*, by Lesley Hazleton, *Longitudes and Attitudes* by Thomas L. Friedman,
