By Alastair McIntosh

Fast on the back of Charlie Hebdo, the callously choreographed burning of the Jordanian air force pilot, Muadh al-Kasasbeh, is likely to reinforce in the eyes of much of the world the idea that Islam is synonymous with murder, and that all religions are a danger, because (turning a blind eye to secular warmongering), “they lead to war.”

Earlier this week I was in a Pakistani-Scottish friend’s newspaper shop. He said he had been listening to an imam interviewed about the Paris atrocities on Radio 5 Live. The poor man squirmed as he tried to explain that true Islam is a religion of peace. The militants, he argued, had stolen its good name. However, the station was giving him no quarter. “But the Qur’an says this, and Muhammad said that,” and to my young friend, it felt as if his religion, and with it is culture...
and identity, were themselves being executed over the air in a kangaroo court.

So, what does the Qur’an and the Prophet (peace be upon him) say about violence? First, it is true that all three of the Abrahamic faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – speak in differing degrees of nuance, either because they express an historical evolution of the human understanding of the divine, or because they are muddled messages, or because they seek to speak to people in differing contexts and differing stations of understanding.

For example, Christian “just war” theory hinges most strongly on post-Christ teachings attributed to Saint Paul where, in Romans 13:4, the authority of a state ruler is legitimised on the basis that, “he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.” This is further augmented by the arguments of Augustine and Aquinas, albeit in tortured contravention of the Christ of the four gospels who taught and practiced, not “just war” theory, but full-on nonviolence.

The acceptance of “just war” theory was the victor’s narrative imposed on an earlier pacifist Christianity as it became cooped into Constantine's Roman Empire around the year 312. Such is the ground to which most mainstream Christians today feel reconciled – the exception being what the World Council of Churches recognises as the “historical peace churches” of the Mennonites, the Quakers and the Church of the Brethren (German Baptists). Augustine’s theory has the advantage, at least, of placing constraints on warfare, including such principles as waging war only as a last resort, by “legitimate” authorities, proportionately, and with safeguards for non-combatants. This remains the lynchpin of military ethics as is explicitly taught in most western military academies to this day and as encoded in the Geneva Conventions.

In comparison, Islam holds much the same principles, some of them even more authoritatively encoded. The core Qur’anic text mandating “just war” is Surah II:190:

*Fight in the cause of God
Those who fight you,
But do not transgress limits;
For God loveth not transgressors.*

Those limits are set out in various hadiths or oral traditions of the Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him). As P.J. Stewart points out in his chapter, “The Prophet at War” in Unfolding Islam, the hadiths specify:
• Not to kill women and children (Bukhari 32)
• POWs to be treated humanely (Bukhari 52)
• Not to mutilate the dead (Sira 388)
• No-one should be killed by burning (Bukhari 52)

On such a basis, the overwhelming majority of contemporary Islamic thinkers hold that terrorism is un-Islamic. (Some extend this to all of modern warfare that kills by firepower.) For example, Scotland’s most senior Sunni Muslim, Dr Bashir Mann, a past president of the Glasgow Central Mosque, has been outspoken for years on this point in his letters and articles in the British and Pakistani press. He draws attention to Surah V:35 of the Holy Qur’an: “If any one slew a person [unjustly] it would be as if he slew the whole people.”

In a current effort to redeem the good name of Islam, the Muslim Council of Britain features prominently on its website a forthright response to the Charlie Hebdo massacre:

*Nothing justifies the taking of life. Those who have killed in the name of our religion today claim to be avenging the insults made against Prophet Muhammad, upon whom be peace. But nothing is more immoral, offensive and insulting against our beloved Prophet than such a callous act of murder.*

To return the focus to Jordan, in 2004 King Abdullah II, out of concern over the use of Islam to justify terrorism, brought into being the Amman Message. Here leading scholars from all major branches of Islam declared infighting between Moslems to be anathema. Today this would include the Islamic State’s war on the rival Shi’a tradition, though until it sprung upon them, the Jordanians had not anticipated the rise of such a force as ISIS.

When an organisation or individuals kill innocent parties, or kill by burning, they violate fundamental principles of Islam. Such is the idolatry of violence – the worshipping (or “giving worth towards”) of a false god – the perversion of Islam into which *alienated, angered and emptied* young Jihadists are drawn. It is the antithesis of the opening verses of the Qur’an, known as “the Essence of the Book” – “*In the name of God (Allah), the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. Praise be to God, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds.*”

Even within the terms “just war” theories, even without recourse to the stronger ethos of nonviolence, terrorism perverts religion, and all religions, to idolatry. The problem with idolatry and the reason why it remains a pressing modern spiritual problem is that it “can’t get no satisfaction.” It is a false-satisfier. It falsely satisfies the spiritual
imperative, irrupting into life (as it can do) as an innate human need. That need, arguably reflecting ultimate reality – the need for profound interconnectedness, the need for a life that is embedded in love. In *War is a Force that Gives us Meaning* the Pulitzer Prize-winning war correspondent, Chris Hedges, reveals the psychological consequences of worshipping a god that demands human sacrifice to this end and is only satisfied by death (pp. 10 & 162):

> **In the beginning war looks and feels like love. But unlike love it gives nothing in return but an ever-deepening dependence, like all narcotics, on the road to self-destruction. It does not affirm but places upon us greater and greater demands. It destroys the outside world until it is hard to live outside war’s grip. It takes a higher and higher dose to achieve any thrill. Finally, one ingests war only to remain numb. The world outside war becomes, as Freud wrote, “uncanny”. The familiar becomes strangely unfamiliar – many who have been in war find this when they return home. The world we once understood and longed to return to stands before us as alien, strange, and beyond our grasp.**

The motivations of young European Muslims who go off to fight for the Islamic State – and they are numbered more in dozens than in hundreds – is probably very similar to bygone Christians who went off to the crusades. In his definitive study written in Scotland, *A History of the Crusades*, Sir Steven Runciman described crusader ideology as having been, “nothing more than a long act of intolerance in the name of God, which is a sin against the Holy Ghost.”

We won’t start to tackle the roots of terrorism unless we recognise that we’re all in this together. It’s not just a thing about Muslims. If religions get the blame, where can be found their roots of redemption? What must it be the spirituality priority of people of pure heart to draw out, and stand up for?

There is now an **ever-growing litany** of the effective use of nonviolence in the face of lethal conflict. Christianity has the gospels of Jesus to prioritise and thereby redeem itself from the “just war” principles legitimised by the Paul of Romans 13, Augustine and Aquinas. Judaism has the later prophets – Isaiah and Micah – with their anticipation of beating “swords into ploughshares”. Progressive Jews such as Rabbi Michael Lerner courageously advance this today through the outstanding magazine that he edits, *Tikkun*. But what of...
Islam?

Behind the headlines, Islam has a long and venerable history of nonviolence. One example was the astonishingly courageous leadership of Ghaffar “Badshah” Khan – the “Muslim Gandhi” – whose unarmed followers stood steady, delegitimising their oppression, as soldiers of the British Raj pumped lead bullets into their chests in the Massacre of Qissa Khawani Bazaar (“the Storyteller’s Market”) in Peshwar in 1930 – still just within living memory.

More recently, the world witnessed the power of well-organised nonviolent Islamic resistance during the Arab Spring. This very much remains “work in progress”. Nevertheless, it has exposed a new generation to the politics of nonviolent direct action.

Most overlooked of all, including by many of Islam’s scholars (perhaps it is too radical?), has been the Islamic basis of nonviolence within the Holy Qur’an itself. Here Surah V:30-35 gives the Islamic version of the world’s first murder, the story of Cain and Abel. When Abel sees the impending outcome of his brother’s spiritual jealousy, rather than retaliate in kind he tells Cain:

If you stretch out your hand to kill me, it is not for me to kill you, because I respect God, the Cherisher of the Worlds. You will only draw down sin upon yourself.

To this, the authoritative Qur’anic commentary of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, published in Jeddah, makes the observation: “To the threat of death [Abel] returns a calm reply, aimed at reforming the other.”

Yesterday the world learned that Lt al-Kasasbeh had been executed: placed in an iron cage, doused with petrol, and set alight. This morning we awoke to news that Jordan, in an initial stroke of retaliation, executed two of its prisoners including a failed female suicide bomber. Petrol continues to be poured on the pyre. New martyrs as recruiting sergeants. Only the hideous god of violence wins.

Like German Christians after the Nazis, Islam has to come to grips with having been hijacked. It needs time, and breathing space, and not to be pushed into corners and humiliated. Who knows, if we ever deployed Trident, we too would have to come to grips with our innate potential for atrocity. We, too, await the Chilcot Report.

All of us are facing a common human problem. Religion might be its presenting face, its stolen and perverted basis for legitimacy, but that is why religions need to reconnect with their deeper spiritual bases of nonviolence. Such is the spiritual task of this century, if not...
millennium. Violence only seems to work on a short temporal wavelength. We must tune in to the long wave.

In the name of Allah: “the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful” (Qur’an I:1).

In the name of Christ: “My Kingdom is not of this world: if it were, then my followers would fight to save me…” (John 18:36).

In the name of Jehovah: “And they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2:4).
Modern fighter-bomber pilots will, in many cases, have burned civilians alive. From Guernica through Dresden and on to Fallujah, how many have we burned?

John Roberton834
February 4, 2015 • 16:22

No, I know, but it’s to be expected when we launch horror casually and callously into the world. Our bombing is and has been monstrous beyond words. Guernica, Hiroshima and Shock and Awe were intended as propaganda too.

IAB
February 4, 2015 • 18:33

It still doesn’t justify it – this was staged and publicised as propaganda.

Reply ↓

E Jenkins
February 4, 2015 • 17:07

Some interesting points, but they should not obscure the very basic problems associated with the spread of Islam in the west. Central to Islam, is Sharia law which is highly discriminatory against women, gays and non-Muslims.

Reply ↓

IAB
February 7, 2015 • 00:56

The Early Days of a Better Nation
The Great Unrest
The Shoogley Peg
The Steamie
The Third Estate
Tocasaid
Today in Scotland
Two Doctors
Village Aunties
Warren Draper
Wee Beautiful Pict
Wee Ginger Dug
Wings Over Scotland

Comics
Grant Morrison
Mark Millar
Metaphrog
Sean Wilson

Commentary
Andy Wightman
Chomsky
Chris Harvie
Civics and Generalism
Edinburgh Review
John Pilger
Mark Lynas
Mute
Rob Edwards
Robert Fisk
I would totally agree with you. When you live in an Arab country, you comply with their rules and, if you don't you're gone. I have always admired this. There needs to be a very clear declaration made when the Scottish state is established of the ‘rules’. If you want to comply then welcome, if you don't then bye. If we believe in equality, then there's one law, no plural marriage, inheritance follows the law of the land and there is no establishing states within states.

Reply ↓

paulcarline

February 4, 2015 • 17:17

We need above all to reflect on what led to the current cycle of violence and what sustains it. It began essentially after the collapse of the U.S.S.R. and the (temporary, in the light of the recent ‘re-demonisation’ of Russia) end of the “Cold War”. Those who create war on the grand scale and benefit from it are not the relatively small numbers of “fundamentalists” who exist in all religions, but the arms manufacturers, the militaries and the politicians (all of whom ultimately serve the financiers).

Their interests lie in perpetual war and the means to serve that aim was to invent a new enemy – Islam – which was very conveniently the major religion in countries which held much of the world’s oil reserves. The creation of the meme of a “clash of civilisations” and of the alleged threat of a resurgent, and more intolerant, Islam began in earnest in the US in the mid-1990s, with the first FBI-inspired and -equipped attack on the World Trade Centre.

It is now known that the Patriot Act and the invasion of Afghanistan were prepared before September 11, 2001, which was the required “new Pearl Harbour” event called for by the neo-cons in their 2000 PNAC paper “Rebuilding America’s Defenses” – “Pearl Harbour” because it was to be an apparently unprovoked and unforeseen attack from outside that would provide the excuse – and the public backing – for the pre-planned attack on Afghanistan. That attack was as much a war crime as the subsequent invasion of Iraq, based as both were on palpable lies.

We live every day with the consequences of the “success” of the September 11 false flag attack and the criminal failure of journalists, politicians and many others to expose it as a lie and as the gigantic “psy-op” it was. That success allowed the real perpetrators (often referred to accurately as the “perpetrators”) to repeat the con over and over again. John Kerry referred accurately to the Charlie Hebdo
attacks as “France’s 9/11” – accurately in the sense that it, too, was a giant false flag psy-op which has already resulted, predictably, in promises of even more surveillance, restrictions on civil liberties – and more funding for the police and military to counter the invented threats.

Hitler consolidated his power by creating fake enemies and scaring the public into silence. We seem to be headed in the same direction as we abandon Muslims to their undeserved fate.

Reply ↓

Lesley Docksey
February 4, 2015 • 17:31

Good one Alastair!
Last year I went to an event at Hilfield Friary labelled “Do we need war any more?” The discussion inevitably turned to the Just War theory. Because words and their use are my thing, I pointed out that:
No war is ever “just”
The just war theory is only used in order to JUSTIFY war, an entirely different kettle of fish.
In his article about the Charlie Hebdo attack and freedom of expression


Jan Oberg made a very important point.
The writers and cartoonists of Charlie Hebdo insisted on their right to freedom of expression (though, if you look at their work, their anti-Muslim cartoons are not just graphic but bordering on pornographic). If you insist on that right then you must accept the consequences, which in this case were violence and death. What you cannot do is label yourself as a victim.
One sure step forward to peace is to put aside playing the victim, and for all of us to take responsibility for our actions. Easy to write, not so easy to do!

Reply ↓

Anton
February 4, 2015 • 19:53

Though I’m all for taking responsibilities for one’s actions, I cannot see that the statement that “If you insist on that right (to self expression) then you must accept the
consequences, which in this case were violence and death. What you cannot do is label yourself as a victim” stands up to even the most casual examination.

The article you cite gives the following example of freedom of expression – “I have the freedom to do a lot – tell the lady next to me at a dinner table that she is ugly (etc)”. Now let’s suppose that the lady concerned, whom you’ve never met before, is so outraged that she stabs you in both eyes with her table knife and blinds you for ever.

Are you really suggesting that in this case you must simply “accept the consequences” and that in no sense are you a “victim” of violence?

I can’t see how this can make any sense at all. In this case the woman’s reaction would be utterly disproportionate (in my opinion at least; you may take a different view) and I suspect if this happened to you, you might not be much impressed by being told that you should just shut up about being a victim of violence and that you should just “accept the consequences” of your remark.

Reply ↓

gonzalo1

February 4, 2015 • 21:35

Pornography is everywhere and it is permitted for we live in a free world and is a matter of opinion what constitutes pornography. The internet is, of course, full of it because there is a demand for it. Where do we draw the line.

Jan Oberg (whoever he is) talks absolute drivel in trying to justify the extreme violence that took place in Paris. They publish because they can. They and we, live in a free world and not in a country dominated by religious authoritarianism. We have freedom of speech; most Arab/Muslim countries don’t. That is not our fault, it is the fault of their despotic and fundamentalist governments.

I am old enough to remember the film The Last Temptations of Christ. There were other films which insulted Christianity and were condemned in some circles as blasphemous. However, nobody died. Christianity took it on the chin and then moved on, for the film itself was mediocre.

The Charlie Hebdo attack was not the first of its type:
people and organisations have been violently attacked in Belgium, Holland and Denmark. There have been murders. What Jan Oberg should be trying to do is defend free speech, as well as denouncing and condemning religious intolerance and aggression. In his ultra political correct pathetic stance he condemns millions of women and gays who suffer terribly from the extremists. He should spare them a thought, not the terrorists.

Reply ↓

layzellicardiff
February 4, 2015 • 17:50

I really don’t know how essays like this will do anything to help all those people suffering hideous violence from ISIS, or help to stop what they're doing. Dancing around what Islam is supposed to be – and Christianity for that matter – is all very interesting but gets us nowhere. I'm sure the Jordanian airforce pilot wasn't thinking about what the Quran says when he was locked in a cage and burned alive.

Reply ↓

IAB
February 4, 2015 • 18:30

I am in the Middle East just now and have just spent a day with Arabs from Libya, Jordan, Saudi, the UAE, Oman and Kuwait. The break time discussion was that Daesh was not Islamic, was destroying the reputation of their religion and absolute and utter horror at the fate of the pilot. These are typical reactions here and I’m sure that things will move quickly and often quietly. The Gulf Arabs don’t want Daesh to destroy the peace in their countries and they have tremendous security resources – keep watching. The Jordanian pilot, will have been praying at the end so he would have kept the Quran in his mind throughout. Just remember – he was our brother.

Reply ↓
sean mcgee  
February 4, 2015 • 19:12

All religions are toxic. It amazes me that when the religious do something heinous they are considered to have the “wrong” interpretation when, in fact, it can be traced to the inerrant “word of god” revealed to them exclusively. I suggest that those seeing religions as inherently peaceful spend some time with Richard Dawkins learn and start, metaphorically, to fight back against violent ignorance.

Reply ↓

ianpatterson2014  
February 4, 2015 • 19:23

I'm with you here, IAB (though physically, as safe as I can be, in Scotland)...

Reply ↓

IAB  
February 7, 2015 • 00:41

There is no danger here and I wish people could know the Arabs as I know them – friendly, open, funny and kind. Obviously, there are vast differences in the politics of the areas but people are people everywhere. The MSM have a great deal to answer for. Just keep in mind that the average Muslim in the Middle East is just like us and Saudi is not the Gulf.

Reply ↓

Alastair McIntosh  
February 4, 2015 • 20:22

I pressed the “send” button on that article to Bella with trepidation, having felt driven to stay up most of the night writing it as I had the background knowledge. A response like IAB’s makes it feel worthwhile – thank you. Can I just mention that in the course of
copying over to Bella the links embedded within parts of the text remained in place, but for some reason lost their colour, and so are (currently) invisible. I've asked Bella if “she” can find a moment to sort it. Meanwhile, hovering the mouse over the text will cause them to show whereupon they can be clicked and work, and they’re good links for those interested in these issues. Also, the para following the colon about Chris Hedges lost its italics indicating that it is a quote from his book.

Reply ↓

bellacaledonia

February 4, 2015 • 21:17

Some formatting fixed (with apologies). I blame some lower minion in the Formatting Department!

Reply ↓

Alastair McIntosh

February 4, 2015 • 21:19

Thanks, Bella, for taking some time out of your evening to fix the invisible links and reset the Hedges quote. Probably one of those PC-Mac compatibility things that aren’t supposed to happen.

Reply ↓

Darien

February 4, 2015 • 21:53

Religion does not kill; people kill. Warmongers are not religious; warmongers are evil.

Reply ↓

MBC

February 4, 2015 • 23:47

There are plenty of suras in the Quran that are bloodthirsty. Then
there is the example of Muhammad personally beheading 600 Jewish males after a battle. Hatred of the Jews in particular is prominent in the scriptures of Islam especially the Quran. There are also these peaceful verses you quote which are routinely produced by apologists for Islam. Scripturally, there is much in Islam that is dodgy and to pretend otherwise is naive.

But scripture is far from the whole story. I'll agree with you there. Islam is also a way of life. It is also a system of community based ethics. The praxis of the daily prayers, the five pillars of Islam, prayer, fasting, alms, pilgrimage is the core of the religion. That's all pretty laudable, and that's the Islam that most Muslims believe in.

The unfortunate thing is the rise of political Islam in the 20th century as a post-colonial counter-narrative, the hijacking of scripture away from the traditional scholars, the ulema. The ulema offered careful exegesis and hermeneutics on the more 'difficult' verses. But extremists want to use Islam, its reputation and cultural power, for their own ends in order to rebuild the Islamic empire, a new caliphate. They are taking these 'difficult' verses at face value without context and consider the world is divided into Dar al Islam (house of Islam) and the rest of the world that is not Islamic is the House of War. Theirs is essentially a secular project using the cover of religion. It aims to reverse modernisation (seen as being equivalent to westernisation). It's anti-western, it wants to reverse the current political order and reinstate Islamic hegemony worldwide, a new imperialism.

Political Islam is all about power, pure and simple. But to pretend there is no link to scripture is misguided.

Reply ↓

Darien

February 5, 2015 • 09:43

They are not the first to use (or rather misuse) religion as a convenient excuse for barbarism. That does not make them religious. They have a grudge against others, pure and simple. It is human nature to seek 'revenge' for wrongdoings, perceived or otherwise. A warmonger commits an evil deed; hence, warmongers are evil. Any link with religion is tenuous. The MSM like us to think otherwise, of course. It is de rigueur for our mostly secular society to ‘blame’ religion when the opportunity presents itself.

Reply ↓
‘It is human nature to seek ‘revenge’ for wrongdoings’
or is it Human Behaviour?

Our behaviour reflects our human nature:

“Human nature refers to the distinguishing characteristics—including ways of thinking, feeling and acting (i.e. behaviour) —which humans tend to have naturally”

“Human Nature is the product of human personality and human character.”

I agree with your drift, MBC, but I’m not suggesting there’s no link to scriptures in violence conducted in the name of Islam. I am suggesting – as I put it in paragraph 3 – that in the scriptures of the Abrahamic faiths we may be looking at a number of cross-currents that includes historical evolution in the human-divine understanding, texts that have been editorially contaminated, and materially that is historically situated.

If you go back to medieval Europe, even early-modern Scotland, Catholics and Protestants did to one another the kind of things that the Islamic State does today. I saw an image going around today of the Jordanian man in the cage juxtaposed with the burning of heretics or witches. These things were considered normal, indeed, they were for the hygiene of the community. Going back further, the Hebrew Bible (or “Old” Testament) is full of atrocities – Moses’ genocide of the Midianites in Numbers 31, David proving himself by going off and culling 200 Philistine (today a.k.a. Palestinian) foreskins in 1 Samuel
18:27, etc., etc.,. These reflect the human realities of those eras. It’s been said that when Moses came along with “an eye for an eye” it represented progress: a limitation on the level of retaliation, a slowing of the spiral of violence. Jesus comes along and puts an end even to that with “turn the other cheek”.

To me, no matter what our faith background if we have one, what’s exciting is this ability constantly to view these ancient scriptures with fresh eyes. In Christianity, Jesus never promised the New Testament. He never even promised the gospels. Only the “paraclete” – the presence of the Holy Spirit (or “Ghost”), and that becomes the lens through which we must discern scripture. That is why I love Runciman’s comment about the crusades having been “a sin against the Holy Ghost” – because it sold Christ short. There’s such good theology around these days that deals with these issues, issues that the likes of Dawkins completely sidesteps in favour of setting up straw men. I think, especially, of books like Walter Wink’s “Engaging the Powers” and Marcus Borg & Dominic Crossan’s “The Last Days”, which unpacks Mark’s gospel as a profound encoded attack on the domination system of the Roman Empire. I choose to be a Christian, much appreciative of interfaith, because I think that Jesus lived out the spirituality of nonviolence so profoundly, revealing a love that never could be killed. But equally, I treasure looking at the scriptures of others – especially the problematic parts that people can experience like a spiritual prison, and seeing how they can be more deeply understood – perhaps transformed. Like in Luke’s gospel where Jesus says, “I come to bring fire to the earth, and wish it was already kindled” – and I’d be sitting there like I once was on a retreat and thinking, “Oh no, he’s completely blown it there – a gift to hellfire preachers,” or, “That’s been slipped in by malicious editing.” Then suddenly it occurs to you – “hang on – this means the fire of the Spirit, the fire of divine love.”

In “The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance”, the German liberation theologian, Dorothee Soelle (who coined the term, “Christofascism”), speaks of the need to move from a “Hermeneutic” (or way of digging for stuff) “of Suspicion” towards “a Hermeneutic of Hunger.” I love that. What is it that we can find in these texts that feed our inner hunger? The more I dig, the more I find, and the hungrier I get. That’s why, in spite of religion being such an embarrassment and sometimes a disgrace, I’ve not given up yet.
I’ve not given up yet either and like you I choose to be a Christian because I find Jesus’ words and example so amazing. I have spent a lot of time with Sufis in Turkey and Jerusalem and I learned a lot about God from Muslims. The culture and arts of Islam are admirable in so many ways. As are Muslims themselves. But Islam both attracted and repelled me and I think the Quran in particular is deeply problematic. My Turkish Sufi friends seemed to think so too... but never said so directly... ‘Ah! The Quran’ they would say, ‘that has to be VERY carefully interpreted...’. They seemed to place more importance on practice, particularly the practice of drawing close to God in dhikr, zikr, and in the reading of the great medieval poets and mystics of Islam. And in the traditions of their tariqqas. The Quran seemed secondary, even tertiary.

Islam used to be a culture of secondary orality... that is, it was a literate culture, but few adherents were literate enough to engage directly with the primary scriptures and those who did were specialists who were highly educated and subjected them to multiple contextualisations. That kept the worst of the Quran from escaping and being ‘misunderstood’ by the ignorant multitude. But now the non-specialist multitude is able to read, and is reading the Quran, in translation, in their own language and they are reading it at face value including the violent verses declaring war on the infidels and Jews without any context or specialist knowledge of the entire corpus of Islamic scholarship which the ulema used to make sense of what I think is a rambling and incoherent document cobbled together by Muhammed’s supporters for political and ideological purposes decades after he died.

OK, I hear you say, ‘But that’s what Jesus’ supporters did too’, except Jesus’ followers appear to have been a more literate and professionally educated group who put together a more coherent set of words, the gospels. Plus they were not involved in a war against the Romans either, whereas Muhammed’s supporters were engaged in imperial expansion.

Sure, after Christianity became the faith of the Roman empire it seems to have taken on a war-like edge, you mention Augustine’s ‘just war’ doctrine, but that was actually centuries after the gospels had been written and the core of Christ’s essentially pacifist and spiritual
message and key doctrines had assumed some sort of shape.

It always struck me as weird that Muslims will not read the older scriptures of the Abrahamic faith. We Christians read and study the Old Testament, though we are not Jews, and we find much wisdom to guide us there. Christian scholars study Hebrew and Aramaic. But despite Muslims accepting the Jewish prophets, and Jesus, they have nothing but contempt for our scriptures saying they are contaminated by mistranslation. The few curious who do read the gospels are often blown away by the words they find there.

After meeting so many amazing Sufis I got interested in Islam and began reading the Quran. I just found it such an appalling text on so many levels I have struggled to understand what others find so interesting and valuable in it. It seems to me that what is admirable in the traditional Muslim faith is in spite of Muhammed and the Quran, not because of them. I think Islam basically absorbed Christian and Jewish spirituality in the Middle East as Muhammed’s supporters gained more power, so that it became more compelling for Jewish and Christian subjects to ‘convert’ officially to Islam, and that is what Sufism is.

Reply ↓

Alastair McIntosh

February 5, 2015 • 17:02

That’s a fascinating set of perspectives, MBC. I too find the Qur’an very difficult to read. The Abdullah Yusuf Ali edition (which is the translation given to me by a Moslem friend, and one of the top versions on Amazon) has a cumbersomeness of English language (see the passages I scanned at the top of this page) that often takes multiple re-readings to grasp. I don’t think it’s just a matter of translation. I’ve found the same difficulty in looking at other translations – though perhaps if any Muslim scholars are reading this they can make recommendations on that matter.

What I like about the Yusuf Ali version is the quality of its commentary. From time to time I’ll
pick it up, browse the commentaries, and only then read the associated verses. Of course, it is the same problem with large chunks of the Bible. There I use the HarperCollins Study Bible (NRSV) with its annotated commentaries and often, these bring dusty old material back to life.

In contrast, the gospels require much less commentary. Many of their passages cut straight to the heart – a bit like those opening lines of the Qur'an do. But I say that as one raised within a Biblical culture, so it might be very different for those who lacked the benefit of Outer Hebridean total immersion!

For people who ask me “what's it all about?” I keep a wee stock of Luke’s gospel in a single volume pamphlet modern translation. Luke, or Mark, are the most approachable (John’s too advanced on the mysticism for starters, and Matthew’s a trip in places, but he gets a bit rabid about “the Jews”). Mark is also great for Zen-like clarity and brevity, but I love the human warmth of Luke, the “beloved physician”, and his evident sympathy for women. Incidentally, somewhere above I referred to Borg & Crossan’s “The Last Days” – it should have been “The Last Week”.

Because I am by choice a Quaker, my primary reference point in faith is not scripture, but the movement of the Spirit; the actual experience of the divine from within, and between people. I find this allows one to be more relaxed in approaching the problems in one’s own traditions. That said, I have had the experience, on prolonged silent retreat, of experiencing the Bible “come alive” as it were – the living reality behind the words on paper. I cannot help but think that for devout Muslims it’s probably the same kind of dynamic at play. What matters is the inner spirit and this, if we allow it, will become the lens through which to read the words.
Why bother with any of this “time-conditioned baggage”? Only, that it has shaped the world’s history and continues to shape current affairs. Plus a little more. As one shifts from heady interfaith “dialogue” to an interfaith “appreciation” of the heart, the imaginative ground of faith begins to shift. As the prayer of the Iona Community put it, we “find new ways to touch the hearts of all” – and to be touched perhaps by all. The great Hindu-Christian scholar, Raimon Panikkar, said “Peace is participation in the Harmony of the Rhythm of Being” (http://goo.gl/ceL0F7). I’ve looked, but I don’t see another way.

**MBC**

**February 6, 2015 • 14:15**

Thanks for this scholarly reply. I agree with you about the authority of the Holy Spirit being more important, ultimately, than scripture. But scripture, especially the gospels, can just be mind-blowing, as in John, ‘and the truth shall set you free’. This sends a shiver down my spine every time I read it. So I think the two work in tandem. I think the Sufis seek the Holy Spirit too, by ‘drawing close’. They want to experience directly the presence of God in their zikr, dhikr in a way that western Christianity has always fought shy of since the Reformation. In Islam there is the concept of burak allah, usually translated as the grace of God, the horse that took Muhammad through the seven heavens at Jerusalem, but I’m not sure it carries the same additional sense of being inspiration or enlightenment and transformation that the Holy Spirit has for Christians. It’s more like a blessing, well-being, than an altered transformative spiritual state of consciousness or a deeper understanding.

But my real point is that in the twentieth century a whole revolutionary literature of political Islam has developed in opposition to modernisation (viewed
as ‘westernisation’) through Hassan Al Banna in Egypt, who formed the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in the 1920s. A similar movement took place in India at Deoband, the Deobandis, and these have ignited and fused with the fundamentalist anti-modern creed of the Wahhabis in Saudi which was exported to mosques across the world by Saudi petrodollars in the last four decades. Political Islam is frequently violent and intolerant and uses the Quran and other foundational scriptures to create an anti-imperial narrative and political ideology that is as pernicious and dangerous as it is soul destroying. It’s powerfully toxic and provides a secular narrative which purports to be religious duty. Given the ‘difficulty’ of the Quran’s more violent verses for all but the ablest scholars, it's powerfully seductive for young Muslims who feel trapped in a secular world with all its complex problems and want simple answers to restore ‘order’.

So two extreme ideologies collide; the extremism of political Islam, and the extremism of western neoliberalism and neoconservatism. The latter is the real spark which is being profoundly destabilising to modernising communities, and even in the more sensitive parts of modern Europe, in the outlying areas like Greece, and Spain, even Scotland (though our problems are far less) it is having impacts, causing people to question and rebel against the forces that are driving it. And all power to them.

I don’t feel it should fall to us Christians to critique the difficulties of the Quran and the ease with which they are ‘misinterpreted’ by power-hungry hotheads reacting against extreme capitalism. That would be disrespectful. All I am saying is we shouldn’t collude with the denial myth that they are not there. Rather, Muslims should do their bit to rein in these ‘misinterpretations’ and we should do our bit, by reining in and critiquing the fundamentalist orthodoxies of neoliberalism and
those forces that promote them. Because that is what is sparking the Islamist reaction – uneven modernisation, and control of the process by shadowy unaccountable power elites.

It is our moral, modern, Christian, duty to challenge these extremist neoliberal orthodoxies. As they are profoundly destabilising.

**Alastair McIntosh**

February 6, 2015 • 15:30

Oh, magnificently put, MBC. Yes, I don’t think most of the west has any idea how neoliberalism, and especially its early playing out in the 1970s Third World debt crisis, has hurt and stirred the ire of these peoples who had alternative cultural values. One of my most cited papers, co-authored with a former student, is on the history of usury prohibition – [http://goo.gl/OO1p26](http://goo.gl/OO1p26) – and since it came out I’ve had so many emails – probably one a fortnight – from Muslims all over the world grateful to see their position being not just understood, but appreciated. We forget that the independence hopes of so many newly fledged countries were stifled in part because of how they were hooked into debt. The Islamic system, of sharing in equity but not screwing down with debt, would not have resulted in the same suffering, because the lender would have had to carry the can for their bad lending decisions by shared loss of equity. And that’s just one example of how advanced capitalist mores destabilised many an independent state and led to a hatred of the west’s new form of colonisation. Most people in the west hardly understand that point, yet it comes through clearly in the voices of earlier Islamic radicals – a great source, mainly Shi’a, is “Pioneers of Islamic Revival” that Zed Press published about 15 years ago.

None of these things excuse the violence. They do help to understand and contextualise it.

We’re probably the only ones left following this thread now. I’d be fascinated to know who you are, or whether I already know you. My email is mail@alastairmcintosh.com. Go well.
We can argue forever about which passage of Scripture says what and tie ourselves up in all sorts of theological knots, but at root, all 3 Abrahamic religions have two main problems: intolerance and cheapness of human life.

Any system which proclaims itself as the “one true faith” is inherently intolerant. Until such religions can recognise plurality and the value of other people’s views, they are condemned to fight against one another.

Any doctrine which promises a glorious eternal afterlife systematically devalues this one life that we have here and now. People who truly believe this will always be prepared to sacrifice what they have for the promise of something better.

Well said and sadly the conflicts within a faith are often more bitter than between faiths. The exaggeration of minor differences whether they be in the area of religion, politics or race all too often led to violence, murder and at the most extreme genocide. The human races inability to see what we share and what should unite us is all too often overwhelmed by the forces of division and tribalism.

That “exaggeration” of minor differences” to which you refer, Monty, resonates with what Freud, in “Civilization, Society & Religion,” magnificently called “the narcissism of small differences.”
I find that expression very interesting, because narcissism is pretty much another word for egotism, albeit with allusions to retarded stages in childhood. That's exactly the spiritual problem of much religion: that ego's “me, me, me” narcissism usurps the soul, and God becomes co-opted to the patriarchal ranks of unresolved father dynamics.

At the same time, such “shadow” work (now in the Jungian sense) is the coal face of spiritual development. Spiritual development is only required because something is undeveloped. There's hope hidden there.

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**Rae Brady**  
February 8, 2015 • 16:54

I would like to thank Aliaster for his initial very enlightening writing. I have been very frustrated that more Imam's hadn't come forward to condemn the terrorists, so it was great to know about Dr Basher Mann and the others, I am Dyslexic so am not going to try and get involved in the debate but will pass this out to others in the hope that it can be taken forward.

I have recently joined unite for Peace and campaign against the arms trade, and am involved with many interfaith groups and feel this is the way forward.

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*Leave a Reply*