

Is terrorism a threat to us all?

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Terrorism is one of those words that is in almost daily usage by the media and there is a tendency for it to be used when it is not necessarily appropriate. (Was the Martin Place violence terrorism, if so what was the aim of it? Was it rather the final act in the life of a very disturbed and needy human being who aligned himself with any group from a bikie gang to a religious sect)? So what is terrorism and what is it not? Terrorism is not any form of random violence, it carries very specific meaning.

Terrorism is: “The unofficial or unauthorised use of violence to achieve a political end”.¹

What then is politics? Politics is about governance and the art of negotiation that humans, social beings, need to employ to achieve social and economic security and wellbeing. Politics necessarily comes into play in all aspects of life be it sport, local community life, the Church, as well as affairs of state, nationally and internationally. The greater the reach of governance sought over diverse interests and expectations, the greater will be the skill required to achieve an outcome which benefits all. In a political vacuum or when the politics has failed, terrorism arises either as an attempt to short circuit the necessary political process, or as an expression of frustration that the aspirations of a particular group are being thwarted, ignored or suppressed. The situation in Syria is an example of the first, the situation in Palestine the second.

Terrorism is essentially about politics, about the failure of (perhaps even absence of) due political process, and not essentially about religion. On the other hand religion has frequently been appropriated in an attempt to ‘noblise’ that which is not noble, to give credibility to that which deserves no credit. The ‘cause’ is frequently the very antithesis of that religion’s basic tenets. Religion can become coterminous with terrorism for one of two reasons. Either the combatants in the cause consider governance to be essentially the domain of religion; or a minority turn their economic or social grievance into a religious or spiritual crusade. The former is clearly the case with Daesh or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which has ambitions for a worldwide caliphate. The latter was the case in Northern Ireland where the catholic population had suffered long term social and economic disadvantage at the hands of British ambitions.

Terrorism is a threat to us all if religion and national governance become coterminous, or if legitimate long term grievances remain unaddressed, or if a party external to the grievance interferes, and without thought upsets the balances that have enabled a measure of cohesion and stability to exist. The involvement of Australia in the Arab conflicts of the Middle East without apparently understanding the history of the peoples’ religion, or their method of governance, or their underlying loyalties may well have opened us to violence which hitherto was unknown to us. There is a sense in which we have tilled the soil which has enabled the emergence of Daesh and we continue to be involved in a conflict without really knowing what the outcome will be, or whether it will lessen or increase deep feelings of injustice in the region.

¹ *Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2007).

Let me turn for a moment to violence within religion. The three Semitic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam share a considerable body of sacred text, including the pre-historical narratives of Genesis. It is well known that these texts contain the narrative of rivalry and violence between the brothers Cain and Abel, the supposed children of Adam and Eve. What is less well known is an informed interpretation of this text which, being pre-historical, might give meaning to all humanity, not simply people of faith, any faith. The name Abel in Hebrew is *Hevel*,² a word for breath. Jews like the Greeks, spoke of the soul or the spiritual dimension of humankind in language drawn from the act of breathing. "In Hebrew words for soul – such as *nefesh*, *ruach* and *neshamah* – are all types of breath".³ *Hevel* means a shallow, fleeting, ephemeral breath. Abel therefore represents human mortality – a mortality that comes less from sin than from the fact that we are embodied souls in a physical world subject to deterioration and decay.

What will eventually kill Abel (humanity) is Cain. Cain in Hebrew means to acquire, to possess, to own. Eve conceived and acquired *kaniti* a man with the help of the Lord.

The entire ethical-legal principle upon which the Hebrew Bible is based and which is sacred to Islam and Christianity, is that we own nothing. Everything – the land, its produce, power, sovereignty, children and life itself – belongs to God. Cain represents the opposite: power as ownership, ownership as power. The Hebrew word for Baal has the same range of meanings. Violence therefore in the teaching of the three Semitic religions begins in competition for scarce goods, of which the first is land. Owning or desiring to own that which belongs to another in the three Semitic religions is the source of violence and ultimately the cause of human destruction.

Given that the Bible assumes this to be a universally applicable truth, a truth that should be applied to all people in every generation, the 21st century looms as open to fairly wide spread violence for three reasons. The first is that in past generations rivalries were, on the whole, localised and could remain so. In a global world this is far more difficult, if not impossible. Leaving aside all other issues, the environmental crisis on its own is potentially the source of very considerable rivalry and violence. Already we are seeing many people becoming environmental refugees. Advanced countries that have historically contributed most to the cause of the crisis are proving very reluctant to change their behaviour. Those who have contributed least but are adversely affected the most can and do feel deeply aggrieved. It is obvious that the seeds of political violence can sprout from this soil; indeed I understand the military are already weighing the potential gravity of this threat.

The second reason is that if violence is largely related to control or ownership of resources; as global population expands, competition for resources, including those as basic as water, will escalate. For example, Israel controls 92% of the water in historic Palestine. Gaza is virtually out of water. The aquifers have become so denuded that salt water has seeped in making them brackish. The health of all especially the children is severely affected.

² among other things the keyword of the book known in English as Ecclesiastes

³ Jonathan Sacks, *Not in Gods Name*

The third reason is that while endemic poverty has been eliminated from some parts of Asia and Africa, nevertheless there is growing global inequity with 1 percent of the global population now owning or controlling 90 percent of the world's wealth. This inequity is not simply restricted to wealth; it also impacts governance – politics. The facts of the matter are that the wealthy have a disproportionate influence on political decision making through their lobbying capacity and this diminishes the appeal of democracy. If it becomes clear that democracy cannot deliver equity then there will be increasing dissatisfaction with the democratic process and a temptation to subvert or challenge it.

I would like for a moment to bring Francis Fukuyama into the conversation, particularly through his: *The Origins of Political Order*.⁴ In this important work Fukuyama argues that human beings have evolved with an essential loyalty to family and tribe. He argues that loyalty beyond that is hard or difficult to sustain. He argues that we have evolved with commitment to such loyalty because of its necessity for survival. A single human being has zero chance of survival; we all need the security and protection of a group. Tribal loyalty continues to prevail as the dominant political engagement in much of Africa, the Middle East and the Pacific with little loyalty shown to national boundaries or national government. Western colonisation has been, in part, responsible for the continuation of tribal loyalty through the imposition of national boundaries that bore little relevance to ethnic, religious or tribal affiliations. As a result, on the one hand people of the same ethnicity can find themselves artificially separated, and yet on the other hand they can be called upon to express loyalty to a form of governance which unites them to others with whom they have little in common. (Those on either side of the border between PNG and West Papua are the same ethnicity). It is useful to remember that the national boundaries of the Middle East did not naturally evolve but were imposed by Western colonisers. The boundaries of what today is known as Iraq were set by the British and those of Syria by France. When the boundary of Iraq was being established by Britain, it was well known that three different loyalties were being imposed on each other, the Kurds, the Shia and the Sunni.

Fukuyama argues that if loyalty is to be enduringly established beyond the family, or tribe, the advantage needs to be clear and the rules that guard that advantage must be strong enough to be relied upon. Since the industrial revolution, economic advantage has been a strong incentive for loyalty beyond the family or tribe. What has guarded and sustained that loyalty has been acceptance of, and commitment to, the rule of law.

When members of a tribal society migrate to Australia, the success of their integration is dependent on many things, but it includes confidence that Australia's rule of law will not be partisan, that it will in effect guard the rights of all without fear or favour. (This is a confidence that much of the Australian indigenous population is yet to realise). For those who migrate to Australia from a tribal society that happens to be Islamic, growth into this confidence takes time and is made more difficult if a language barrier continues for too long. It may take a generation for this confidence to grow; in the meantime there might be a temptation to fall back to Sharia law, upon which folk have customarily relied. This integration becomes virtually impossible if there is a perception, let alone a

⁴ Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political order* (Profile Books: London, 2011).

real life example of Australian law unfavourably treating those who are yet to have full confidence in it.

How am I to summarise a very complex issue? Much of the terrorism with roots in the Middle East has grown out of a failure of national politics. Libya, Yemen, Egypt, Iraq Syria, perhaps even Lebanon, fail to deliver a national form of governance which overcomes tribal rivalries. The West has been keen to remove despots but has given little thought to what form of governance will replace them.

Even in the West, politics is destructive if it is partisan and confrontational in its style. Australians rightly rejected this style in the Abbot Government and they hope for better in the Turnbull Government. Either the idea of nation state, a relatively recent historical invention, has to be abandoned, or that State must find a form of governance that does not clearly advantage one group at the expense of another. Also, given the irreversible nature of globalisation, no nation state or group of states can seek unjust advantage at the expense of other states and not expect to live with the consequences.