



The Black Book of Religion: II

Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.

—Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

Could any infidel contrive a better argument for the heartless malevolence of the Almighty than the grief inflicted by God’s more zealous disciples? The question became immediate and personal when my wife and I visited London this summer seeking archival enlightenment about the West’s political penetration of the Islamic East. On July 7, the Islamic East’s offspring struck back, sowing rush-hour mayhem in the London Underground. By chance, we were living in a friend’s flat two blocks from the King’s Cross tube station, and in fact were bound for the Piccadilly line only minutes after a suicide bomber had boarded an earlier train. Within days, the diligent British police identified three perpetrators as youths of Pakistani origin who had arrived by rail the same day from the northern city of Leeds, each carrying a backpack stuffed with explosives.

Most devastating were the images captured on closed-circuit television at King’s Cross, showing the three and a fourth suspect “smiling and laughing” shortly before they “blew themselves up on three Underground trains and a bus” (*Economist*, July 16–22). They *laughed!* Would their pleasure have been keener, one wondered, if their backpacks had stowed biological weapons capable of slaying tens of thousands? Yet to all appearance, these were not monsters, but seemingly ordinary young men, born British, proficient at cricket and soccer, observant but not fanatic Muslims. So what drove them to mass murder? Analysts instantly cited resentments honed in an ethnic ghetto, peer pressure, boredom, anger over Western humiliation of Islamic countries, the need to spite a parent or to impress a girlfriend, or often (so surmised the *Economist*) “they have grown apart from their family; some might have drifted into petty crime, or an un-Islamic taste for alcohol and women. Something then leads them to religion and thence radical voices preaching the Utopia of worldwide Islamic rule.”

All the above may be true, but to my mind is not sufficient. What occurred in London indeed adds a codicil to Hannah Arendt’s icy observation about the banality of evil: here we encounter the total banality of pubescent evil. Yet, uncounted young males experience emotional turbulence without slaying scores of strangers. An essential added ingredient is a license to kill, supplied and sanctioned by clerical authority, thereby exonerating the murderer of civilians from personal guilt. And sadly, the world’s major faiths have all, in the past or present, proffered this sanction, among the most shaming misdeeds of organized religion.

This truth is amply attested by Blaise Pascal, France’s great savant who lived and taught in the seventeenth century amidst incessant religious bloodbaths. “Man is neither angel nor brute,” he remarked in his *Pensées* (published eight years after his death in 1670,

when he was finally beyond the reach of earthly tormentors), “and the unfortunate thing is that he who would act the angel acts the brute.” Rereading Pascal prompted this first supplement to *The Black Book of Religion*, a hypothetical volume I conjured in our spring issue, with these new entries inspired by recent events.

God as Coconspirator

Whenever a great natural or manmade disaster occurs, almost reflexively a loud devout voice will discern divine purpose. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the avenging will of Allah was discovered by Muhammad Yousef al-Miafi, director of research at Kuwait’s oddly named Ministry of Endowment. (His discovery was reported by the Middle East Media Research Institute in Berlin, whose report can be found at <http://www.memri.de>.) In his view, “It is almost certain that [Katrina] was a wind of torment and evil that Allah has sent to the American empire. Out of my absolute belief in the truth of the words of the Prophet Muhammad, this wind is the fruit of the planning of Allah, as stated in the text of the Hadith of the Prophet.” He cited the Koran 13:31, which reads: “The disaster will keep striking the unbelievers for what they have done, or it will strike areas close to their territory, until the promise of Allah comes to pass, for, verily, Allah will not fail in his promises.”

Christian evangelists were as quick to discover a contrary form of divine retribution last Christmas, when a devastating tsunami overwhelmed South Asia, killing at least two hundred thousand people, among them vacationing Swedes. Promptly posted on the Web was a December 29 news release from the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, boldly headed “Thank God for the Tsunami! And 2,000 Dead Swedes!!!” The church’s pastor saw in the disaster “a small adumbration of worse things to come” for Sweden, “the Land of the Sodomite Damned!” Why? Because Sweden provoked God’s silent, irresistible wrath by allegedly coddling homosexuals, thereby inviting this Scriptural anathema: “For the moth shall eat them up like a garment, and the worms shall eat them like wool” (Isaiah 51:8).

Thus did Topeka commiserate at Yuletide with stricken Swedes, a cruel but characteristic updating of a tradition almost as old as religion itself. The Bible asserts that Yahweh drowned all but Noah and his family in the Flood, and that He rained fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorah. Ever since, not a war has been lost, or a city destroyed, or a plague has struck without the announcement of a providential cause by a priest, minister, or rabbi. This despite the troubling paradox that the godly and ungodly perish together, as in 1714 when the Bridge of San Luis Rey, the finest in Peru, mysteriously collapsed. In Thornton Wilder’s celebrated eponymic novel, *Brother Juniper*, a puzzled Franciscan, vainly seeks to discover why the finger of God hurled five very different people into the Apurímac gorge. For asking this inconvenient question, the friar was burned at the stake. (“He called twice upon St. Francis, and leaning upon a flame he smiled and died.”) It was a parable with a regrettable resonance in the Judaeo-Christian world.

Today’s voices from Kuwait and Topeka are but extreme examples of innumerable mainstream sermons seeking to reconcile the impersonal violence of nature with a truly just divinity. Yet, from a secular vantage, this widespread impulse seems the ultimate form of a blame game, a way of reducing mortal accountability for the global warming that evidently generates ever-stronger hurricanes, or for bungled responses to fire, earthquakes, and pestilence. The unintended effect, it may be ventured, is to diminish God by treating Him as a coconspirator, or more blasphemously, by shamefully implying that He applauds human suffering.

How much more creditable are the thoughtful words of Dr. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury. In an article published in February in the London *Daily Telegraph*, he cautioned that prayer provides no “magical solutions” and most of the stock Christian answers to human suffering do not “go very far in helping us, one week on, with the intolerable grief and devastation in front of us.” He added, “The question, ‘How can you believe in a God who permits suffering on this scale?’ is therefore very much around at the moment, and it would be surprising if it weren’t—indeed it would be wrong if it weren’t.”

The Shrine as Provocation

Nearly two centuries ago, William Hazlitt, arguably the greatest of English essayists, analyzed and deplored the pleasure of hating, which he likened to a poisonous mineral that “eats into the heart of religion, and turns it to rankling spleen and bigotry.” He marveled that savages were condemned for merely eating their enemies while Christian divines cast those with whom they disagreed by a hair’s breadth “into hell-fire, for the glory of God and the good of His creatures!” He went on to ask: “What have the different sects, creeds, doctrines in religion been but so many pretexts set up for men to wrangle, to quarrel, to tear one another in pieces?” (Hazlitt, “On the Pleasure of Hating,” in *Selected Essays*, Random House, 1948).

When it comes to respect for the most hallowed religious sites, Hazlitt’s censure credibly applies to all the major faiths. Instead of peace, tolerance, and goodwill, holy places too often engender scandalous hysteria, bitterness, and bloodshed. This August, a million or so Iraqis gathered in Kadhimya, a Shiite district in northern Baghdad, to honor the memory of Moussa al-Kachim, one of Shia Islam’s 12 revered imams. As pilgrims arrived at the imam’s shrine (according to a September 1 report in the British *Guardian*), persons unknown fired mortars at the crowd, killing seven and wounding dozens. When the panicky faithful then crossed the al-Aima Bridge over the Euphrates, a rumor spread that a suicide bomber was among them, precipitating a stampede that killed as many as 963 persons, wounding hundreds more.

Alas, this is a not uncommon phenomenon. In Saudi Arabia’s Mina Valley last year, a stampede left 250 pilgrims dead, including 52 Indonesian Muslims, when a crowd surged over a bridge to throw the traditional stones at three pillars representing the Devil. That toll had been exceeded in 1990, when a riot in a crowded tunnel near Mecca claimed an estimated 1,400 pilgrims, including 600 Indonesians. In Jerusalem, hysterical behavior is so familiar that psychiatrists have formally identified a “Jerusalem Syndrome.” This refers to the bizarre behavior of Christian and Jewish pilgrims who shout, quarrel, and sometimes announce that they are ancient prophets on an apocalyptic mission. Jerusalem is a city where no religious slight is forgotten. Muslims recall that the second intifada ignited in 2002 following riots on the Temple Mount when Ariel Sharon and a throng of Israeli companions provocatively chose to inspect the Dome of the Rock. Jews recall that during the long years of Jordanian control of East Jerusalem, their pilgrims were heartlessly denied access to the Wailing Wall. Christian guides note that the city’s Golden Gate was spitefully sealed centuries ago by Muslims because the Angel Gabriel was prophesied to enter the Holy City through it.

The Jerusalem Syndrome was memorably conveyed by Robert Curzon, a British traveler related to the famous Indian viceroy, who visited the Holy City in 1834. He was present during the notorious Good Friday riots at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, when at least three hundred died. As Curzon wrote: “The behavior of the pilgrims was riotous in the extreme; the crowd was so great that many persons actually crawled over the heads of others,

and some made pyramids of men by standing on each other's shoulders.... Some, almost in a state of nudity, danced about with frantic gestures, yelling and screaming as if they were possessed. Altogether it was a scene of disorder and profanation which it is impossible to describe" (*Visits to Monasteries in the Levant*, London: John Murray, 1849).

Yet it cannot be said that Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims have set a better example. India is still recoiling from communal riots more than a decade ago that followed the sacking by Hindu extremists of a Muslim mosque at Ayodah, said to mark the birthplace of the Hindu deity Rama. More than 3,000 lives have been lost in this unresolved dispute that still festers in the courts. For their part, Taliban fanatics in Afghanistan ordered the destruction in March 2001 of the Bamiyan Buddhas, the giant 1,500-year-old statues that have been an immemorial focus for pilgrims. The deed was ordered by Kabul's former supreme leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, who said his decision was based on the command of God and the Koran. Similarly, in predominantly Buddhist Sri Lanka, three suicide bombers in 1998 crashed into Colombo's most sacred shrine, the Temple of the Tooth, killing eight and sparking riots. So bitter is Sri Lanka's ongoing sectarian strife that in June Colombo police needed water cannon and tear gas to subdue Buddhist monks who rioted furiously to protest sharing any tsunami aid with Tamil rebels, who are mostly Hindu and Muslim. And all this violence and hatred has been perpetrated, ironically, in the name of Moses, Jesus, Allah, Buddha, and the life-giving gods of India.

Found: A Common Enemy

Nonetheless, leaders of the great faiths have found common ground, and in Jerusalem at that. There they joined together in a news conference, an event so unusual that their photograph graced the March 31, 2005, front page of the *New York Times*. Present were Israel's two chief rabbis, the patriarchs of the Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Armenian churches, and three senior Muslim prayer leaders. Shlomo Amar, Israel's Sephardic chief rabbi, explained that they were protesting a phenomenon that caused "deep and terrible sorrow" and that "hurts all religions. We are all against it."

What then mobilized this rare show of interfaith unity? Would the clerisy at last unite to denounce suicide bombing, or the offering of bribes as an incentive to martyrdom, or the vicious propagation of ethnic hatred from whatever pulpit, or to urge the richer nations to share more of their wealth, or to plead the case for cleansing the skies and river waters? No, the united front was formed to protest the prospective desecration of the Holy City by a gay rights festival that might convey the erroneous impression that homosexuality was acceptable. As Abdel Aziz Bukhari, a Sufi sheikh, explained, "We can't permit anybody to come and make the Holy City dirty. This is very ugly and very nasty to have these people come to Jerusalem."

Surely it is not churlish to view this show of unity as an unwitting self-indictment. One can have the deepest respect for the role of faith in mobilizing humanity's better instincts and yet decry the inability of organized religion to rise to its avowed universal values of love and charity, and of peace and tolerance, so wanting in this disordered world. One longs for the news that Providence's mightiest earthly voices—the Pope and Protestant archbishops, the Grand Mufti and chief rabbis, the imams and abbots—would come together to proclaim that the sanctity of life applies without exception to all God's children. And who might justly chair such a summit? I would nominate His Holiness, the Dalai Lama. ●

—Karl E. Meyer