

TERROR AND VIOLENCE AS EXPRESSIONS OF THE PATHOLOGY OF THE MODERN WORLD AND NOT OF THE PATHOLOGY OF ANY TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

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The subject of terror has indisputably become the prevailing topic of present-day politics, scholarship and the media presentation of those elements of public interest that express the circumstances in which we are now living and threaten to erode all our millennium-long cultural and civilizational achievements, for the very reason that these events carry with them a potential menace to all of us. In brief, the working definition of terrorism borrowed from Audrey Kurth Cronin is: “the use or threat of violence against the innocent for political ends by a non-state perpetrator”¹. The problem is further complicated by the very existence of what is known as *state terror*. Audrey would say that terrorism is such an emotive subject that, particularly in the wake of tragic events, many people would rather fall back on inaccurate assumptions or stereotypes than acquaint themselves with the serious analyses of those who study the phenomenon.²

And yet, however extreme and tragic these times may seem, they are not without precedent. Audrey alerts us to the fact that Muslim fundamentalist terrorists are not the first “religious” terrorists, that suicide bombers are not a new phenomenon, and that the use of terrorism as an asymmetric weapon against predominant power is not a historical exception (other examples include the Zealots or Sicarii,³ the Muslim assassins,⁴ the Indian thugs,⁵ the

1 See Audrey Kurth Cronin, *Understanding the Nature, History and Sources of International Terrorism*, in: *Revija slobodne misli*, trans. N. Kahteran, no. 40/2003, pp. 16–20.

2 *Ibid.*

3 A Jewish terrorist group that existed for about four centuries and that carried out attacks with the aim of destabilizing and undermining the power of the Roman Empire.

4 A group active roughly from 1090 to 1275 CE, which targeted prominent officials.

activities of Sikh extremists, and the perverse conduct of the Aum Shinrikyo Japanese Hindu–Buddhist cult). One can certainly agree that the behaviour of any terrorist group is repugnant, regardless of their motives and possible pretexts. However, present–day religious terrorism is not in itself a genuinely new phenomenon, nor is it a problem that is rooted in or associated with any given region. Unfortunately, the only true novelty of our times is the globalization of international terrorism, which is something one must face up to without falling into the trap of demonizing epithets and stereotypes or of observations of a selective nature or encumbered with the taint of politics.

However, as became crystal clear after the tragic events of 11 September 2001, following which the political realities of the Islamic world are now being viewed through the lens of cultural stereotypes and amorphous collectivities, and when these demonizing epithets and choleric misconceptions have become the point of reference for constructing Islamophobic political discourse and an integral part of what is regarded as common knowledge about Islam and Muslims, given that the Islamic world took centre stage that day as a result of those tragic events — in the light of all this, my central assertion in this brief account is in fact the very contrary of these views: terror and violence are expressions of the social pathology of the modern world, not of the pathology of any traditional religious model of thought. Is this not a shocking thing to say in the light of today’s events? Especially today, when one of my favourite authors, Slavoj Žižek, writes that “one should gather the courage to recognize the obvious fact that there is a deep strain of violence and intolerance in Islam—that, to put it bluntly, something in Islam resists the liberal–capitalist world order. By transposing this tension into the core of Islam, one can conceive such resistance as an opportunity: It need not necessarily lead to “Islamofascism”...⁶ Hence his questioning, his doubts when people “put forth the distinction between Islamic fundamentalism and Islam, à la Bush and Blair, who never forget to praise Islam as a great religion of love and tolerance that has nothing to do with disgusting terrorist acts.”

I agree with Žižek that it is indeed worth gathering the courage finally to acknowledge something that is entirely different from his assertion, and that is the patent fact of the suicidal course taken by the modern world and which appears to be carrying the postmodern world with it too. In this unprecedented historic situation, the part played not only by Muslims, but by all the followers of the world’s religions in general in creating an awareness of human

5 India’s thugs were the longest–lasting terrorist group in history, in existence for some six or seven centuries (perhaps even longer). They sacrificed their lives to the Indian god of terror and destruction, Kali, and were finally eliminated by the British in the mid 19th century.

6 Slavoj Žižek, *Passion: Regular or Decaf?*, in *In These Times*, 27 February 2004: www.inthesetimes.com

responsibilities as the complement to human rights, represents in itself a high degree of responsibility, as does the question of one's relationship with the followers of other religions, which is relatively easy in the light of the Qur'anic doctrine of the universality of revelation,⁷ while also taking into account, of course, those who do not believe in either a transcendental or an immanent Principle above the human principle. The reasons for this are patent: there is no choice but for us to live in mutual respect and love for the Other (with a capital O), with care and infinite responsibility for the Other (E. Levinas), or we shall all be lost. Evil cannot be overcome by another or greater evil, but only by doing greater good; and for this, there is an overwhelming need for the ancient wisdom of the East (the doctrine of yin and yang), that we frequently lose sight of. The path of evil can only, inexorably, deepen the spiral of hatred and create new and inexhaustible resources of violence and terror in this world, of evil in other words, which is not a principle, but the absence of the true principle of good, whereby evil merely multiplies still further, with no prospect of our defeating it.

Having keenly followed what has been written since 11 September, a date that for many irrevocably changed the world, I should like here to draw attention to a book, or rather a lengthy essay, by Professor Muhamed Filipović, a man dear to me. It is a matter for regret that this work of his, *Islam i teror* — Islam and terror — has not yet been translated into English. For instead of setting out the four positions as does, for example, Ian Markham (the American, the pro-Jewish, the pro-Arab and, finally, the fundamentalist, religious interpretation),⁸ Professor Filipović,⁹ to whose findings in this regard I unre-

7 This reminds me of the Dalai Lama's lecture at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Society of Jesus in Zagreb on 8 July 2002 entitled A Buddhist Approach to Interreligious Dialogue, but seen only from the Buddhist point of view. The question is how, from the starting point of one religion — one truth, to come to an understanding of the globalization of the spiritual where there are essentially different positions, or in other words to a position of several religions — several truths.

8 See *September 11: Religious Perspectives on the Causes and Consequences*, ed. Ian Markham & Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi'e (Oneworld, September 2002), a work that coincided with the first anniversary of these tragic events and illustrates the need for a shift from "superficial" dialogue, which includes polite exchanges, to a "science" of dialogue, which includes a more rigorous scrutiny of global perspectives, cultural assumptions, and the various interpretations for disagreement. Finally, in line with Ian Markham himself, the reactions to 11 September in the United States can be classified under these four positions: the first is the leading American interpretation of the clash between democratic pluralism and totalitarianistic Islamism; the second is the pro-Jewish interpretation, that draws parallels between 11 September for America and the on-going problem of terrorism in Israel; the third is the pro-Arab interpretation that acknowledges that nothing can justify the events of 11 September 2001 but also says that one must take into account what it was that provoked such anger; and the fourth is the fundamentalist, religious interpretation.

9 See M. Filipović, *Islam i teror*, Sarajevo: El-Kalem, 2002.

servedly subscribe, shows that the source of people's inclination towards terror in all the various forms it takes should rather be sought in the way we live now, in the high levels of human frustration and in our ill-adapted world, dictated not by human needs but by technological advances controlled by the interests of a few individuals or groups. This essential awareness of the spiritual state of the world of today, and of the question of terrorism, reflects the social pathologies of the modern world, not the pathology of any genuine traditional (but not traditionalist) model of thought; which, Filipović would say, is merely an attempt to sweep under the carpet the issue of the historical creation of Westerners as the only legitimate one, thereby suppressing or nullifying all others.

I hope I may be permitted at this point, however, to put the question posed by Henry Corbin: "What's the good of vituperating the West when in any case you are forced to imitate it, even to become like it?"¹⁰ Shortly after this, however, Corbin asserts that the confidence with which the West still believed, at the beginning of the twentieth century, that technological advances would bring happiness, would restore the lost paradise, if we look at it afresh, can provide us with a yardstick for our despair today. It has become a snare and a delusion. The science that was to set us free has created the instruments of death. However, he concludes, paraphrasing Wagner's *Parzifal*, that "Only the weapon that made it will ever cure the wound", a phrase similar to the famous saying that where danger lies, there too arises the chance of salvation, or even the textual evidence of the Qur'an (Sura Al-Inshirah, 5–6): *And, behold, with every hardship comes ease: verily, with every hardship comes ease!*

So what does this bring to light? We are still at the heart of the process, Corbin would say,¹¹ it is still too early to understand or respond to it, but not too early to sense a horrific disaster. However, there remains the question of what kind of people will take on this kind of responsibility. Even when clerics fail to live up to such expectations or betray, in Corbin's view, there still remain the kind of people who emerge from modern, desacralized culture, the type of people usually known as intellectuals, who have the obligation, so to speak, of drawing attention to this social pathology of the modern world, a pathology that is accustoming people to the presence of violence as something quite normal and logical, and where they are all too familiar with danger and the presence of death. In this regard, I regard as key Filipović's view that terrorism in the modern world derives from the simple fact that our contemporary way of life is impregnated with violence *per se*, without any connection to particular theories or beliefs. As a result, he claims, violence and terror are

10 Henry Corbin, *The Concept of Comparative Philosophy*, trans. from the French by Peter Russell, Golgonooza Press, 1995.

11 Op. cit.

the logical expression of the modern way of life, and penetrate into every culture and religion, but from the exterior, never from the premises of their teachings. As a result, terrorism *eo ipso* cannot be derived from the premise of religiosity. In fact, speaking of the madness of power, he claims that we are living contrary to nature, and that nature's revenge on us has left us unable to make a clear distinction between good and evil, that we have lost the sense of the ethical, and that we are ourselves part of a vast, pragmatic machine of exploitation and destruction, of which terrorism is merely the most immediate and precise expression.

Finally, the search for the causes of terror cannot be located in the domain of various beliefs and ideologies, and particularly not in the domain of Islamic belief, since it is perfectly clear that terror is much more deeply entrenched in the modern way of life. What is more, the very phenomenon of terrorism is the expression of our contemporary European, or Western, civilization, and of certain of its features of which we are not sufficiently aware, or which we are deliberately ignoring; or perhaps we have no answer to them, even though we are aware that it is from them that our present difficulties arise.

Certainly, many of these differences are painful and typical, but we believe that it is vital that we address these painful divergences of opinion in a scientific manner. As a result, the formation of a Department of Religious Studies could always be of great assistance in considering what to espouse: universalism and inclusivism, or even particularism and exclusivism, in the spirit, of course, of a genuinely academic, open and critical approach to the study of these phenomena, to the extent that we succeed in avoiding the intellectual myopia, the kind of parochialism and narrow-mindedness that was never immanent in the identity of Bosnia and that cannot be imposed as a norm, despite all the misfortunes that have befallen us and by which we are still beset. It is my profound conviction that people can be differentiated only by whether they are inclined to similarities or to differences, that evil is merely the absence of good, and that there is no other way of conquering it except by doing still greater good.

Finally, where Islam itself is concerned, presenting it in the West as other, political, militant and fundamentalist, which is the product of and backed by a vast network of writers, politicians, journalists and speakers, with an equally dangerous copy generated in the entertainment world — this way of presenting it consigns the word Islam to political and military conflict, and has a debilitating influence on the reduction of the Muslim world to the sub-category of the Middle East in the minds of many Americans and Europeans. But there are also those in the Islamic world who see the West as inherently hostile to Islam and, in Professor S. H. Nasr's view,¹² this is why we must speak out

12 See S. H. Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity*, Harper, San Francisco, 2002. (in introductory chapter, p. xi–xiv). Also, there is Bosnian translation of this work:

against such ignorant and malign opinions. The fate of the West and the Islamic world are so intermingled that no one should reduce matters to an “us” and “them” model of mutual exclusion.

But to conclude: despite prevailing perceptions of Islam as a threat to the other of the West, whether conceived as Judaeo-Christian or as secular, or both, there is another way of seeing things, where Islam and the Islamic world are viewed as the sister civilization of the West and as part of the Abrahamic tradition, which includes Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and that opts for an approach of adjustment, co-existence and dialogue, as opposed to the demonization of Islam by representations of Islamic fundamentalism, radicalism and terror. We can see, in fact, that there the field of comparative research is wide open, and that it is so new and so extensive that it induces a certain vertigo, to use Corbin’s phrase again. However, although I do not want to over-emphasize this here, since it is a subject I am only just beginning to study, I believe that this is the right time and place to draw attention to this area, even if only figuratively and provisionally, by referring to the ever more convincing opportunities for creating a school of comparative philosophy and comparative religious studies in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a school that would be relevant to the world at large — and to do so in the very near future.

Srce islama: trajne vrijednosti za čovječanstvo, translated by E. Karić, R. Hafizović and N. Kahteran, Sarajevo: El-Kalem, 2002.