

The West and the Rest

– stories from three places

A talk in March 2015

PLACE A: Us and Them

Ladies and gentlemen, the killing of journalists at the Charlie Hebdo offices in January this year was an act of pure evil, unmitigated barbarism, motivated by fear and hatred of western civilisation. All people of good will must rally to declare the values of égalité, liberté, fraternité, the values of the European Enlightenment, the values of our Judeo-Christian heritage. All should declare their solidarity with the victims of the dark forces of evil barbarism, all should stand shoulder to shoulder with those victims, all should say Je suis Charlie Hebdo.

The barbarism of Al Qaeda-related terrorism is the greatest threat the civilised world currently faces. The AQ narrative holds sway in countries throughout North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia, and here in the West it is an insidious fifth column bent on the islamification of European and north American culture.

Of course, most Muslims are moderate, peaceful and law-abiding most of the time. But virtually all sympathise with the AQ narrative and virtually none have even spoken out against Islamic terrorism, let alone attempted to eradicate it. Since Muslims themselves are unable or unwilling to deal with the problem the onerous responsibility is ours.

It has become fashionable for Guardian readers and their ilk to sneer at the mission civilisatrice of European powers in the nineteenth century, and to mock the white man's burden that their forefathers shouldered in order to bring life, liberty and the pursuit of true happiness to – yes – the half devil, half child who inhabits the world beyond western shores. The mission and the burden are still there, they are still here. Gentlemen, we shall not fail or falter; we shall not weaken or tire. Gentlemen, messieurs, nous sommes tous Charlie Hebdo, give us the tools and we will finish the job.

PLACE B: Them and Us

Comrades, I have never heard such sanctimonious, hypocritical nonsense in all my life. How dare that man claim that Europe and North America are civilised? They didn't civilise the world, they sent out their crusaders to pillage, loot, steal, wreck, enslave, torture, humiliate, murder. We drove them out of our lands but alas not entirely out of our hearts and minds, and we are still fighting against the puppets and parrots they continue to prop up, the jackals and watchdogs, the snakes, stooges and scorpions that took their places, and the murderous, thieving outpost they set up in our beloved Palestine.

The world contains evil, yes indeed, and there it is, in the history and religion of Europe and America. People there claim to be inspired by Jesus, peace be upon him, but they don't begin to grasp let alone embrace the merciful and compassionate nature of the God who sent Jesus as a messenger to humankind. Since Christians themselves are unable or unwilling to deal with the evil their religion has spawned, the onerous responsibility is ours.

They say we are terrorists. Well yes, some of us are. But not on the scale they have perfected, not on the scale of slavery in the Americas, of Belsen, of Hiroshima, of Guantanamo and Abu Graib. Our terrorism is focused on symbols – the Twin Towers, the vile and puerile Charlie Hebdo magazine – not on humiliation and cruelty, and it is sacrificial, people give up our own lives to show how angry and desperate they are.

But oh, comrades, what most of us in the West want is to play a full part in western societies as equals, serving if we wish God the merciful, God the compassionate.

PLACE C: Notes towards a judgement

Friends and fellow citizens, some notes towards a judgment.

Saadi Shirazi, whose full name was Abū-Muhammad Muslih al-Dīn bin Abdallāh Shīrāzī, and who is widely known simply as Saadi, was born in about 1210 in the country now known as Iran. His father died when he was a small child and he grew up in poverty. When an adult he travelled throughout the Middle East, Turkey and Central Asia as a merchant and scholar and at one stage spent seven years as a slave, his masters being European Crusaders. He died when he was about 80, in 1290. Throughout his life he wrote poems. 'The world is not a courtroom,' one of these says, 'there is no judge, no jury, no plaintiff. It is a caravan, filled with eccentric beings telling wondrous stories about God.'

Moses, peace be upon him, went to thank the Lord for delivering the people of Israel out of the hands of Egyptian slave-owners. The people of Israel had escaped from evil bondage in Egypt and the Egyptian riders and their horses had been drowned in the sea. 'My soul praises you, Adonai,' said Moses, 'for delivering thy children from oppression.' He noticed then that God was weeping. 'Wherefore,' asked Moses, 'art thou weeping? What are thy issues, Adonai?' 'My issues, Musa,' replied the God of Israel, 'are that I loved those Egyptians who have been drowned in the sea and I am weeping for them, they were my children too.'

On Friday 8 July 2005 (8/7, the day after 7/7) there were hundreds of thousands of email messages flying through cyberspace about what had happened in London on the previous day. Two of these on the website of the Times Education Supplement were written by schoolteachers:

'We reap what we sow. Live with it, and keep it in proportion. This is not a risk-free environment and never will be.'

'Our job now is compassion, for the families and victims of the bombs and for the children taught that suicide is glorious. Compassion is all that will bring hope from this: anger's done enough already. All we can do is keep open the possibility of reconciliation in our torn world. I feel really, really sad. My thoughts and prayers are with everyone who lost someone yesterday.'

Mohammed Ould Slahi was born in Mauritania about 44 years ago. On 20 November 2001 when he was a 30-year-old electrical engineer and telecommunications specialist, he received a visit at the house where he lived with his mother and his aunt. In the following months he was subjected to terrible cruelty and since 2002 he has been incarcerated at Guantanamo Bay, where the cruelty has continued. He has never been charged with a criminal offence. A few weeks ago, after many legal battles, he published the diary which he wrote in 2005. 'I understand,' he wrote at one point, 'that nobody is perfect, and everybody does both good and bad things. The only question is, how much of each?'

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Robin Richardson, Woodstock, 7 March 2015