

TIMES ONLINE

From The Times

September 11, 2007

9/11 and the cult of death

Our correspondent contends that our response to September 11 has been deficient. Radical Islam, he argues, must be recognised as a fanatical death cult, such as Nazism or Bolshevism

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"In my humble", as one of Updike's Pennsylvanians likes to put it (sparing himself the chore of saying "opinion"), the name for what happened on September 11, 2001, is "September 11". In fact, "September" alone may eventually prove adequate – just as every Russian, 90 years on, knows exactly what is meant by "October". But the naming of September 11, that day, that event, naturally fell to America. And America came up with something pithier: "9/11".

They are inconsistent, over there, on the matter of abbreviation. For example, they would rather say "FWD" than "four-wheel drive", even though the supposed contraction adds two syllables (and let's not forget that worldwide fatuity, "www", which cuts three syllables down to nine). On the whole, though, if a phrase is constantly on American lips, then Americans will seek to shorten it. Why knock yourself out saying "Jennifer Lopez" when you can save precious time with "J-Lo"? And if you want to include "Ben Affleck" in your sentence, there is the thrifty "Bennifer", giving a dividend of five syllables (as does the cineast's code for Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, "Brangelina").

9/11 is a couple of syllables shorter than September 11, and is to be warmly congratulated on that score. Of course, no one refers to Independence Day as "7/4" – or to Hallowe'en as "10/31" or to Christmas as "12/25" – but such anniversaries are hardly the theme of year-round discussion. Further to recommend it, I suppose, 9/11 sounds snappy and contemporary and wised-up, like "24/7". True, there is the unfortunate resemblance to "911", the national phone number for the emergency services (the equivalent of our 999), but this distraction pales before 9/11's triumphant and undeniable brevity. In addition, though you may have your doubts about its appropriateness, and its utter lack of historical resonance (where is the French avenue 7/14, the Italian Piazza 4/25?), 9/11 does have the humble merit of unambiguously denoting September 11.

Or at least it does in America. In the UK, 9/11 can't even manage that. Yes, even this menial task is beyond it. As everyone knows (in another section of their minds), the British system proceeds, rather more logically, from small things to large: day, month, year. So 9/11 doesn't denote September 11 – not over here. I have no attachment to our way of doing it, and there's a case for the comprehensive adoption of the American method, if only to economise on our embarrassment. Such a switch would be ridiculous, admittedly, but it would only be ridiculous once (rather like our celebration of the millennium, with po-faced pomp, a year too soon); it wouldn't go on being ridiculous for ever.

Then came the attacks, in London, of July 7, 2005. And within a matter of hours, it seemed, we were gazing at that truly pitiful contrivance, "7/7" (a nickname, incidentally, that America has not adopted). Well, at least 7/7 was palindromic, and we could evade the day-month anomaly with which we had saddled ourselves; and perhaps we could go on evading it, so long as Islamism confined its "spectaculars" to such dates as January 1, February 2, March 3, and so on. But the postponement was brief. A fortnight later we learnt of the bungled bombings of July 21 – and hereafter the consensus silently cracked. In the press it is not uncommon, now, to see references to "the 21/7 trial" on the same page, or even in the same piece, as the usual stuff about 9/11.

I don't really care which way round they go: my principal objection to the numbers is that they are numbers. The solecism, that is to say, is not grammatical but moral-aesthetic – an offence against decorum; and

decorum means “seemliness”, which comes from *soemr*, “fitting”, and *soema*, “to honour”. 9/11, 7/7: who or what decided that particular acts of slaughter, particular whirlwinds of plasma and body parts, in which a random sample of the innocent is killed, maimed or otherwise crippled in body and mind, deserve a numerical shorthand? Whom does this “honour”? What makes this “fitting”? So far as I am aware, no one has offered the only imaginable rationale: that these numerals, after all, are Arabic.

Meanwhile, in Great Britain, nearly all our politicians, historians, journalists, novelists, scientists, poets, and philosophers, many of them deeply anti-American, have swallowed the blithe and lifeless Americanism, and go on doggedly and goonishly referring to September 11 as November 9. Why? For the LCD reason: everyone does it because everyone does it; it is the equivalent of a verbal high-five. But the cunning of history, the cunning of *Clio*, that satirical muse, has already made a firm reckoning. September 11, 2001, is the most momentous event in world history since the end of the Cold War. And the Cold War ended when the AntiFascist Protection Barrier, otherwise known as the Berlin Wall, was decisively breached – on November 9, 1989. That is to say, on 9/11.

The above, I suggest, is a very minor parable about the herd instinct: the herd instinct and its tolerance of nonsense. The rolling creed we call Islamism is also an embrace of illusion, as indeed is religion itself – a massive and multiform rearguard action, so to speak, against the fact of human mortality. Our own performance, in what we may limply but accurately call the struggle against those who use terror, has also shown signs of mass somnambulism and self-hypnosis. This is true at the executive level, insofar as the Iraq misadventure (and much else) is a corollary of the neoconservative “dogma”; and it is true on the level of individual response. Six years later, we are all still learning how to think and feel about September 11.

In the summer of 2006 I came back to live in the UK after two-and-a-half years in South America. I maintain that I had not become more of a fascist in the interim – at the feet of a Galtieri, say, or at the knee of a Pinochet. But in politics it is surprisingly easy to move from side to side while staying in the same place; and the middle ground, I discovered, was not where it used to be. The extent of the shift became dramatically clear to me on live television, when I appeared on *Question Time* (the BBC’s interactive discussion show) and was asked about our progress in what was now being called the Long War.

The answer I gave was, I thought, almost tediously centrist. I said that the West should have spent the past five years in the construction of a democratic and pluralistic model in Afghanistan, while in the meantime merely containing Iraq. In Afghanistan we have already seen, not the “genocide” eagerly predicted by Noam Chomsky and others, but “genogenesis” (in Paul Berman’s coinage) – a burgeoning census. Since 2001, the population has risen by 25 per cent. Meanwhile, too, needless to say, the coalition should have been tearing up the earth of Waziristan in its hunt for the remnants of al-Qaeda.

At this point I started looking from face to face in the audience, and what I saw were the gapes and frowns, not of disagreement, but of disbelief. Then a young woman spoke up, in a voice near-tearful with passionate self-righteousness, saying that it was the Americans who had armed the Islamists in Afghanistan, and that therefore the US, in its response to September 11, “should be dropping bombs on themselves”! I had time to imagine the F16s yowling in over Chicago, and the USS Abraham Lincoln pumping shells the size of Volkswagens into downtown Miami – in bold atonement for the World Trade Center, for the Pentagon, for United 93, United 175, American 11, and American 77. But then my thoughts were scattered by the sound of unanimous applause. We are drowsily accustomed, by now, to the fetishisation of “balance”, the groundrule of “moral equivalence” in all conflicts between West and East, the 100-per-cent and 360-degree inability to pass judgment on any ethnicity other than our own (except in the case of Israel). And yet the handclappers of *Question Time* had moved beyond the old formula of pious paralysis. This was not equivalence; this was hemispherical abjection. Accordingly, given the choice between George Bush and Osama bin Laden, the liberal relativist, it seems, is obliged to plump for the Saudi, thus becoming the appeaser of an armed doctrine with the following tenets: it is racist, misogynist, homophobic, totalitarian, inquisitorial, imperialist, and genocidal.

As I drafted this piece (in early July), Dr Kafeel Ahmed – the furious, steaming, orange-hued hulk we saw applying himself at Glasgow Airport – lay slowly and expensively dying in the burns unit of the Royal Infirmary. At that time, too, we were learning about the men who planned and botched the attacks of July 21, 2005. And certain questions could now be asked in a rather less self-reproachful spirit. It might even be that we have ceased to toady to those who proclaimedly seek our murder.

Was Ladies' Night at the Tiger Tiger discotheque a legitimate target for Dr Ahmed's "anger" about Iraq? Were the morose North Africans of July 21 "desperate" about Palestine? And what do all the UK jihadis have in common, these brain surgeons and jailbirds, these keen cricketers and footballers, these sex offenders, community workers, former boozers and drug addicts, primary-school teachers, sneak thieves, and fast-food restaurateurs, with their six-litre plastic tubs of hairdressing bleach and nail-polish remover, their crystalline triacetone triperoxide and chapati flour, and their "dockyard confetti" (bolts and nuts and nails)? And the answer to that question seems to be slowly dawning. What they have in common is this: they are all abnormally interested in violent death.

Let us briefly trundle through the argument for moral equivalence, and let us begin with a trio of ascertainable truths. First, the years 1947 and 1948 saw two imperialistic decisions that guaranteed an increase in hostility between Muslim and non-Muslim: the partition of India along religious lines, and the establishment of the state of Israel. (These decisions also led to, but did not invent, murderous hostility between Muslim and Muslim – in East Pakistan, in Gaza). Second, throughout the 1970s the Arab regimes sponsored by the US started to head off political dissent by guiding the opposition towards Islamic fundamentalism. And, third, in the 1980s the US backed the Mujahidin against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, and also helped to fund the Pakistani madrassas, whose graduates (all of them unemployable zealots) increased from 30,000 in 1987 to well over half a million by 2001.

Thereafter, or so the equivalence argument goes, the Islamist vanguard, having wearied of seeing the battles fought exclusively on its own soil, visited a taste of this destruction on the West. Which turns out to suit the neocons and Christian Zionists, who can now place the US under military rule while they prepare their push for Islamic oil and for Israeli hegemony in the Middle East. The goals of the so-called "terrorists" (who are merely responding in kind to state terrorism from the US and its clients) are not delusive or messianic but solemnly political. So it has always been: the oppressed struggle against the oppressor; the wrongs of the past rise up to avenge themselves on the present.

The equivalence line always anticipates the usual counter-argument, which it considers to be an orientalist smear: that the Islamists are fanatics and nihilists who, in their mad quest for world domination, have created a cult of death. With each passing day, however, the counter-argument is sounding like an increasingly sober description of reality. With the 20th century so fresh in our mind, you might think that human beings would be quick to identify an organised passion for carnage. But we aren't quick to do that – of course we aren't; we are impeded by a combination of naivete, decency, and a kind of recurrent incredulity. The death cult always benefits, initially at least, from its capacity to astonish and stupefy.

Gathering what we can from the works of such thinkers as Sayyid Qutb, Abul Ala Mawdudi, and Abu Bakr Naji (the author of *The Management of Savagery*), and from various pronouncements, fatwas, ultimatums, death threats, and suicide notes, we may compare radical Islam with the thanatoid political movements we know most about, namely Bolshevism and Nazism (to each of which Islamism is indebted). Of the many affinities that emerge, we may list, to begin with, some secondary characteristics. The exaltation of a godlike leader; the demand, not just for submission to the cause, but for utter transformation in its name; a self-pitying romanticism; a hatred of liberal society, individualism, and affluent inertia (or *Komfortismus*); an obsession with sacrifice and martyrdom; a morbid adolescent rebelliousness combined with a childish love of destruction; "agonism", or the acceptance of permanent and unappeasable contention; the use and invocation of the very new and the very old; a mania for purification; and a ferocious anti-Semitism.

But these are incidentals. Thanatism derives its real energy, its fever and its magic, from something far more radical. And here we approach a pathology that may in the end be unassimilable to the nonbelieving mind. I mean the rejection of reason – the rejection of the sequitur, of cause and effect, of two plus two. Strikingly, in their written works and their table talk, Hitler and Stalin (and Lenin) seldom let the abstract noun reason go by without assigning a scornful adjective to it: worthless reason, craven reason, cowardly reason. When those sanguinary yokels, the Taleban, chant their slogan, "Throw reason to the dogs", they are making the same kind of Faustian gamble: crush reason, kill reason, and anything and everything seems possible – the restored Caliphate, for instance, presiding over a planetary empire cleansed of all infidels. To transcend reason is of course to transcend the confines of moral law; it is to enter the illimitable world of insanity and death.

This dual negation is for a while intensely propulsive. It gives the death cult its needed momentum – its

escape velocity. On the other hand, for our part, the high value we assign to human life is not a matter of illusion or sentimentality or “hypocrisy”; it is not the “Papist-Quaker babble” derided by Trotsky. Reason, moreover, is one of our synonyms for realism, and indeed for reality; without it, as Islamism will soon find, the ground turns to mire beneath your feet. Death cults are in the end obedient to their own illogic: what they do is die.

Certain actors in the Middle East, Hassan Nasrallah of Hezbollah, Moqtada al-Sadr of the Mahdi Army, and even Ismael Haniyeh of Hamas (Hamas, whose charter goes so far as to “quote” from The Protocols of the Elders of Zion), are within evolutionary distance, you feel, of a political process that concerns itself with practical outcomes. Osama, and his bewilderingly repulsive surrogates, are in the position of the Japanese military in the months before Pearl Harbor. Without supernatural intervention on behalf of our divine emperor, the top brass argued, we can’t conceivably win. But for a time we can raise merry hell. And that’s what they decided to go ahead and do.

September 11 means September 11, 2001 – the day the towers came down. It was also the day when something was revealed to us. Do we now know what that was? Much of our analysis, perhaps, has been wholly inapposite, because we keep trying to construe Islamism in terms of the ratiocinative. How does it look when we construe it in terms of the emotions? Familiar emotional states (hurt, hatred, fury, shame, dishonour, and, above all, humiliation), but at unfamiliar intensities – intensities that secular democracy, and the rules of law and civil society, will always tend to neutralise. There is religious passion too, of course, but even the bruited, the roared fanaticism seems unrobust. It may even be that what we are witnessing is not spiritual certainty so much as spiritual insecurity and spiritual doubt.

Islamism has been with us for the lion’s share of a century. The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1928, and within a decade there was an offshoot in what would soon become Pakistan. But the emotionally shaping event, one is forced to deduce, was the establishment of the Jewish Homeland. In the war fought to bring that about, Israel, occupying 0.6 per cent of Arab lands and with a proportional population, defeated the armies of Egypt, Syria, and Trans-Jordan, together with the supplementary forces of Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq.

In the other 99.4 per cent of Arab lands, this event is known as al-nakba: the catastrophe. And that epithet hardly overstates the case. The “godless” Soviet Union, after a comparable reverse, might have fallen into troubled self-scrutiny; but what does it mean for peoples who sincerely believe that an omnipotent deity is minutely attentive to their desires and deserts? Having endured several centuries of Christian prosperity, global power and reach, and eventual empire, the Islamic nations were vanquished by a province the size of New Jersey. In the Koran, the Jews are portrayed as cunning and dangerous, yet they are never portrayed as strong: “Children of Israel . . . Dread My might.” We in the West have ceased to understand the meaning of the word “humiliation”, and we use it, in descriptions of our daily struggles, with the lilt of comic hyperbole. Now we must further imagine how it feels to be humiliated, not only by history, but also by God.

This was surely a negative eureka for the Muslim idea. Following the defeat of 1948, and following the defeat (in six days) of 1967, Islam, or its militant vanguard, was finding that it had arrived at a crossroads – or a T-junction. The way to the left was marked Less Religion, and meant a journey to the future. The way to the right was marked More Religion (Islam is the Solution), and meant a journey to the past. Which direction would lead to the return of God’s favour? On their left, a stretch of oily macadam, perhaps resembling one of the unlovelier sections of the London orbital, scattered with windblown trash, and, of course, choked and throttled with traffic. On their right, something like a garden path at the Alhambra, cleaner, simpler and – thanks to the holy warriors and their “smiting of necks” – much, much emptier. In *Al Qaeda and What it Means to be Modern*, John Gray reminds us that Islamism, in both its techniques and its pathologies, is on the crest of the contemporary. But the emotions all point the other way; they speak of retrogression and revanchism; they speak of a vehement and desperate nostalgia.

Sayyid Qutb, like someone relaying a commonplace or even a tautology, often said that it is in the nature of Islam to dominate. Where, though, are its tools and its instruments? The only thing Islamism can dominate, for now, is the evening news. But that is not nothing, in a world of pandemic suggestibility, munition glut, and our numerous Walter Mittys of mass murder. September 11 entrained a moral crash, planet-wide; it also loosened the ground between reality and reverie. So when we speak of it, let’s call it by its proper

name; let's not suggest that our experience of that event, that development, has been frictionlessly absorbed and filed away. It has not. September 11 continues, it goes on, with all its mystery, its instability, and its terrible dynamism.

September 11, 2007. The Times

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