

ICRD Monthly Update

January 14, 2015

Paris in an Age of Rage

As the total number of terrorist incidents caused by Muslim extremists increases over time, with Paris being the latest, it becomes tempting to conclude that Islam is anything but a religion of peace and that major steps should be taken to counter its spread and growing influence. Before being drawn too far



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down this path though, we would do well to reflect on how, in another context, we might be compelled to draw similar conclusions about other faiths based on the activities of such groups as the Ku Klux Klan or the so-called Lord's Resistance Army of Northern Uganda (whose evil deeds in the name of religion are every bit as onerous as those of the Muslim radicals). Extrapolating from the extremist behavior of such groups to condemn an entire religion is foolhardy at best.

Aside from the fact that one of the two policemen who was killed protecting the journalists was a Muslim and that another Muslim risked his life to save seven Jews in a related incident, prominent at the heart of all major world religions are fundamental precepts relating to neighborly concern and the betterment of humanity. Islam is no different. Sadly, however, religion is too easily co-opted by power politics – most often to justify undeserved claims to existing resources, a liability that has been playing out on the world stage for any number of centuries.

Thus, a key part of the challenge is to hold our respective religions accountable for the values they supposedly represent. In a geopolitical context in which religious legitimacy often trumps all other considerations, the best antidote for religious ignorance is religious understanding. When the latter prevails,

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religion can become one of the more effective instruments for developing trust and bridging differences, as has already been demonstrated on any number of occasions (most of which often go unnoticed).

There are at least two other important reasons that we need to “get religion right.” The extent to which American Muslims are perceived to be marginalized or persecuted, plays directly into the hands of the terrorists in their recruitment strategies and justifications for violence.

And, to the extent that the American Muslim community embraces American values and has a stake in the system, it becomes our first line of defense against extremist



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behavior. Fortunately, America has done a reasonably good job of assimilating Muslim immigrants; and at last count, Muslim citizens were the first to alert authorities in some 40% of the planned terrorist plots that have been uncovered to date.

It is often easy to lose the forest in the midst of falling trees, but our chances for not doing so will greatly improve if we can rise above our visceral reactions to individual acts of terrorism and consider the larger whole – and how that whole can be enhanced with a more sophisticated understanding of other cultures, including how religion informs their world views and socio-political aspirations. Thus equipped, we should be more than able to develop agile strategies that preclude having to cede the religious high ground to terrorists in the eyes of potential recruits.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Douglas Johnston". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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