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Avoiding Dialogue with Alternative Worldviews at any Cost

Timid hypocrisy in responding to terrorism

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Introduction

It might be argued, if either was prepared to engage in meaningful dialogue, that both the so-called Christian world and the world of Islam have reasons to deplore practices of their respective societies. However, neither culture considers that it has anything whatsoever to learn from the other. Each represents for the other the deplorable world of ignorant unbelievers: lost souls for the Christians, *jahilliya* for Muslims.

Demonizing the other

As Christians, both Bush and Blair would be proud to convert all Islam to Christianity -- and the loss of any number of human lives in that cause would be assessed as acceptable, as with the early crusaders. It is no wonder that the Christian leadership seeks to frame Islamic agendas in the way most offensive to Christians -- a technique reminiscent of military "psychological operations" and negative advertising campaigns. It is no wonder that Islam seeks to protect its values -- however aggressively and offensively it endeavours to extend its own community elsewhere. Each is a natural mirror for the most reprehensible features of the other.

Curiously in this context, and whatever the number of deaths, it is considered completely justified to avoid any investment in the challenge of dialogue with those who are apparently totally intractable -- unless it is done under conditions of interrogation, assisted by electrodes or whatever other forms of "encouragement" seem appropriate. In 1998, for example, a now declassified study for the US State Department recommended that the Clinton administration "initiate a dialogue with the Saudi Arabian religious establishment" -- but the recommendation went unheeded [[more](#)].

Timid dialoguers

For the personal representative of the UN Secretary-General for the [Year of Dialogue among Civilizations](#) (2001), "dialogue with terrorists often results in death" [[more](#)] -- an attitude which helps to explain the precarious approach of the UN peace-keeping force to situations like Srebrenica and Rwanda. The same might however be said of "dialogue with nature" characteristic of many extreme sports in which people voluntarily engage in celebration of being alive -- knowing the risks (cf annual mountaineering deaths). It is curious that

no "dialoguers" seem to have the courage to engage in "extreme dialogue". There is no fearless "Dialogue Delta Force" or "Dialogue SAS" going boldly "where others fear to tread" -- rather a culture of dialogue cowards -- despite the protective "dialogical armour" and overwhelming superiority in "dialogical weaponry".

This incapacity exists in striking contrast to the ability of some (often extolled in movies) to dialogue with violent criminals (notably in hostage situations), with the criminally insane, or with those bent on suicide. It is also in striking contrast with the ability of the Coalition of the Willing to develop a working relationship with certain inhumane leaders of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan -- or to develop an accommodation with governments in that region known to practice the most repugnant forms of torture.

Failure of imagination to deal with an alternative logic

A spokesperson for Tony Blair indicated on 20 July 2005 in respect of a dialogue with Muslims indicated that:

.... there seemed to be, to use the Prime Minister's words of yesterday, a twisted logic that in some way we had to get extremists on board. What we were actually doing was tackling head on the extremist viewpoint and mobilising the moderate Muslim element along with other mainstream thinking to take on that extremist view. This was not about bartering with the extremist view. It was about taking on that debate at a local, national and international level. The twisted logic was that in some way you had to concede to the extremist viewpoint. You did not....As the Prime Minister had said the central problem and difference, apart from the use of violence, was that their demands were of such a nature that you could not negotiate with them. [text]

This argument would seem to ignore the merits of actually encountering those who hold a radically distinct perspective, rather than admitting total incapacity to do so. Any "barter" or "negotiation" only comes after seeking out some basis for communication. The pejorative notion of "twisted logic" fails to acknowledge that any encounter between distinct cultures involves an impression of twisted logic (cf *Twistedness in Psycho-social Systems: challenge to logic, morality, leadership and personal development*, 2004). The agenda of the leadership of the Coalition of the Willing has itself been described as based on twisted logic. The complexity of any interface with "twistedness" needs to be respected in a period in which "complexity research" supposedly provides insights into previously inexplicable phenomena -- which might be considered a key characteristic of differing religious perspectives (cf *Engaging with Questions of Higher Order: cognitive vigilance required for higher degrees of twistedness*, 2004).

Where physicists can expend vast amounts of public funds on investigating the twistedness characteristic of "anti-matter", governments exhibit a high order of timidity in developing any viable approach to those holding radically distinct perspectives. The planet has every right to fear such irresponsible incapacity in the event of the arrival of extraterrestrials (cf *Distinguishing Patterns of Assumption in Dialogue with Aliens: Communicating with Aliens*, 2000)

New language required for "extreme dialogue"?

A fruitful articulation of the challenge, perhaps overly cautious, is that of Hans Herbert Kögler (*Is Dialogue with Terrorism Possible?* 25 October 2001) who distinguishes between "dialogue with terrorism" and "dialogue with terrorists":

At the same time, making sense of terrorism will have to involve a real dialogue nonetheless. It will have to address, not directly those who are fanatically engaged in a "jihad" against the evils of Western civilization per se, but all those, not terrorists themselves, who applaud the destruction of symbols of Western power, who support the idea of attacking the super-power of the USA, and who consider Osama bin Laden a much-needed Muslim fighter against the West. It is crucial, I believe, to enter into a real and probing conversation with the sympathizers and supporters of anti-Western terrorism-at least to signal, from our side, the openness to such an exchange. It is important to understand what fuels such discontent, what enables the support of students, workers, mothers, etc. of such acts of aggression, and to be willing to address what might have to be done from their point of view.....

What would a new "language of dialogue" require? What would it look like? Certainly, a basic premise would be an attitude of openness toward the experiences and concerns of the other, an empathetic sense of how they might feel, experience, and conceptualize events and encounters with us. Such a dialogical imagination, necessary to overcome a self-absorbed monologue within the confines of one's own cultural self-understanding, is essential as a sign of equal recognition-another premise of ever moving beyond fruitless and violent confrontations between them and us.

But even the possibility of dialogue is itself considered unreasonable by such as Polly Toynbee (*In the Name of God*, *The Guardian*, 22 July 2005) commenting on 7/7:

Enlightenment values are in peril not because these mad beliefs are really growing but because too many rational people seek to appease and understand unreason. Extreme superstition breeds extreme action. Those who believe they alone know the only way, truth and life will always feel justified in doing anything in its name. You would, wouldn't you, if you alone had the magic answer to everything? If religions teach that life after death is better then it is hardly surprising that some crazed followers will actually believe it.

The existential timidity in the face of "extreme dialogue" is unworthy of a civilization "reaching for the stars" and potentially dependent on fusion energy. The latter is famously dependent on the craziest "Theories of Everything", as illustrated by the much-quoted statement by Niels Bohr in response to Wolfgang Pauli: "We are all agreed that your theory is crazy. The question which divides us is whether it is

crazy enough to have a chance of being correct. My own feeling is that it is not crazy enough." To that Freeman Dyson added:

"When a great innovation appears, it will almost certainly be in a muddled, incomplete and confusing form. To the discoverer, himself, it will be only half understood; to everyone else, it will be a mystery. For any speculation which does not at first glance look crazy, there is no hope!" (Innovation in Physics, *Scientific American*, 199, No. 3, September 1958)

Could the challenge of dialogue with, and between, the "crazy" perspectives of religions be fruitfully seen in this light? Investment in this possibility might offer more hope than seeking crudely to eliminate and demonize insights that may, in some as yet unknown way, be vital to the future creativity and diversity of humanity?

Hypocritical historical amnesia

Forgetting who were perceived as "terrorists" in the 1917 revolution, for President Vladimir Putin (6 February 2004):

But the commonly accepted international principle of fighting terror is an unconditional refusal to hold any dialogue with terrorists, as any contacts with bandits and terrorists encourage them to commit new, even bloodier crimes. Russia has not done this, and will not do this in future.[\[more\]](#)

Forgetting who were labelled "terrorists" in the American War of Independence [\[more\]](#), or in the American Civil War (cf the [Bushwackers](#) and Jayhawkers), for President Bush (2 May 2002):

And there is never any reason whatsoever to establish dialogue with terrorists, ever. To initiate dialogue with terrorists is tantamount to problems for democracy. Terrorists cannot have, must not have, and certainly for our part will never have any other fate than that of being permanently defeated...[\[more\]](#)

This presumably follows from the advice of specialists such as Ralph Peters (*When Devils Walk the Earth: the mentality and roots of terrorism, and how to respond*, [GlobalSpecialOperations.com](#), 2005):

Do not be drawn into a public dialog with terrorists, especially not with apocalyptic terrorists. You cannot win. You legitimize the terrorists by addressing them even through a third medium, and their extravagant claims will resound more successfully on their own home ground than anything you can say. Ignore absurd accusations, and never let the enemy's claims slow or sidetrack you. The terrorist wants you to react, and your best means of unbalancing him and his plan is to ignore his accusations.

Forgetting the fear associated with IRA terrorism, Ian Buruma (*Homeland insecurity*. *Financial Times*, 16-17 July 2005) argues, following 7/7 :

The IRA was the armed wing of a political party, whose aims, as we now know, were at least negotiable. Suicide bombers and *jihadis*, however, represent no state; indeed they do not recognise one outside the wholly imaginary community of pure faith. There is nothing to negotiate with people who wish to kill as many infidels as they can to establish a divine realm of the faithful. Worse, those holy warriors, who see mass murder as an existential act, who cannot conceive of themselves as anything else but divinely inspired assassins, are even beyond the pale of religious orthodoxy; they are pure killers....

Justifying failure to dialogue -- or learning how to

Emphasis tends therefore to be placed on the acts resulting from dissidence, described as terrorism, rather than on research into means of dialoguing with those holding opposing viewpoints -- that are prepared to back them with extreme violence:

- P.K. Abdul Ghafour. *No Dialogue With Terrorists, Says Prince Naif*, *Arab News*, 12, November, 2003
- Bishop of Southwell George Cassidy. (cf *Bishop urges dialogue with terrorists*, 5 May 2004)
- *Talking with the Enemy: opportunities and risks of dialogue and negotiation with terrorist and insurgent groups* (Seminar, Rome, 15 November 2003)
- *Presbyterian Church Leaders Meet with Terrorists in Lebanon: ADL says "irresponsible" decision furthers interfaith rift*, Anti-Defamation League, 20 October 2004
- *A Debate in the Saudi Press on Dialogue with Saudi Al-Qa'ida Members*. Middle East Media Research Institute, November 2003
- *Europhobia: Talking with terrorists 20 years on*, 14 September 2004
- Nabil Sultan. *Dialogue with terrorists: some say why not*. 25 May 2004
- James Brandon. *Koranic duels ease terror*. *The Christian Science Monitor*, 4 February 2005
- Ze'ev Schiff. *Is Hamas a dialogue partner?* *Haaretz.com*, 8 July 2005

However, most representatives of governments would rather die than dialogue. Some dissidents have already been obliged to recognize that. Suicide bombing has consequently been transformed into a mode of communication with the very hard of hearing. There is an interesting parallel between the refusal of government to enter into meaningful ongoing dialogue with its own population (eg the challenges of the European Constitution) and the refusal of government to enter into dialogue with those with grievances in other countries in which it intervenes. In each case government denies the legitimacy of the grievances and uses every conceivable device to

inhibit effective two-way transfer of meaning and learning. *Who benefits* from denying that the consequence is predictable?

Vastly disproportionate resources are now allocated to investigations to identify isolated culprits of marginal significance -- compared to the modest resources required for any dialogue necessary to ensure that such acts are not repeated. In consequence, the "technology" for effective dialogue with potentially violent dissidents is not being developed -- and is effectively non-existent. It is supposedly much cheaper to invest further in the technology of yet higher levels of surveillance, policing, detention and destruction, and to bomb, torture or assassinate people into submissive consensus. How much narrower a strategic focus is it possible to have when the chairman of the Crisis Management Committee in London (on 27 July 2005) foresees a decade or more of extremely heavy policing -- supposedly because "We have no choice"? *Who benefits* from closing down the strategic options through a pattern of groupthink and cross-party consensus peer pressure?

Challenging anti-dialogue hypocrisy

Such a perspective contrasts with both the essential message of Christianity and that of the *Qur'an*, as noted by Robin Cook:

After all, it is written in the *Qur'an* that we were made into different peoples not that we might despise each other, but that we might understand each other. [\[more\]](#)

How ironic that 9/11 should occur in the UN's [Year of Dialogue among Civilizations](#). What of relevance to dialogue with dissidents, and those with grievances, was then learnt by the UN? But, as Cook also notes:

The danger now is that the west's current response to the terrorist threat compounds that original error. So long as the struggle against terrorism is conceived as a war that can be won by military means, it is doomed to fail. [\[more\]](#)

But, on the other hand, for the Director General of Political and Military Affairs of the EU Council of Ministers, Robert Cooper (*The morality of amorality in foreign policy*, *Daily Times*, 14 July 2005):

The threat of terrorist attack causes people to re-examine human rights and legal standards. It may be more important instead to look at the language in which we discuss terrorist incidents. At times dialogue with terrorists may be needed; there may be reason to avoid making this impossible by fixating too rigidly on moral imperatives and condemning all terrorists as unspeakable criminals.

Isolating representatives of alternative perspectives

Even Cook argues for isolating terrorists rather than dialoguing with them. This is curious since so many leaders of newly independent countries have been labelled "terrorists" by those from whom they sought independence (starting with France and the USA, and including Israel and South Africa). Were Gandhi and others not labelled as "terrorist"? [\[more\]](#) At some point it was necessary for the labellers to dialogue with Gandhi, Kenyatta or Mandela, for example.

The approach adopted in the case of 7/7 is to expel any "radical clerics" -- instead of learning from the challenge of dialoguing with them as a unique resource. The most virulent micorganisms are carefully studied in special laboratories. *Who benefits* from removing those capable of articulating the "terrorist" position -- in order to avoid such learning?

But for Cook:

Success will only come from isolating the terrorists and denying them support, funds and recruits, which means focusing more on our common ground with the Muslim world than on what divides us. The G8 summit is not the best-designed forum in which to launch such a dialogue with Muslim countries, as none of them is included in the core membership.. We are not going to address the sense of marginalisation among Muslim countries if we do not make more of an effort to be inclusive of them in the architecture of global governance. [\[more\]](#)

Cook rightly notes that:

The breeding grounds of terrorism are to be found in the poverty of back streets, where fundamentalism offers a false, easy sense of pride and identity to young men who feel denied of any hope or any economic opportunity for themselves. A war on world poverty may well do more for the security of the west than a war on terror. [\[more\]](#)

In the larger sense of terrorism, noted above, it is however only too true that it is bred in the poverty within "Christian" industrialized countries as much as within impoverished "Muslim" countries elsewhere. How successful are the industrialized countries in responding to the challenges of their own backyards? Is the "war against terrorism" in fact a welcome distraction from their incapacity in that respect?

Who benefits from the systematic denial of the possibility of dialogue between those of intractably opposed views?

Hypocritical postponement of meaningful dialogue

From a larger perspective, both parties might be understood to be engaged in a peculiarly barbaric form of dialogue -- typical of the failures of 20th century thinking. The question is when the bombing by each side can be "upgraded" to some more fruitful form of dialogue. Given Tony Blair's style, there is however every possibility that he will at some stage in the future deny (despite evidence to the contrary) that he had ever declared that dialogue with terrorists was impossible. This would after all be consistent with the UK's long history of eventually talking appreciatively to the declared "terrorists" of every territory emerging from the UK's altruistic colonial domination (starting with the USA, and including Israel).

Typical lag-times before dialogue with terrorists becomes possible are indicated by: Israel ([Irgun](#) active as a declared terrorist organization from 1931 to 1948, under the leadership of [Menachem Begin](#), who subsequently became the sixth prime minister of Israel and a Nobel Peace Prize laureate); South Africa ([ANC](#) terrorism commenced in the 1960s and continued until the group was legalized in 1990, a period exemplified by the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela, prior to becoming president); Kenya ([Mau Mau](#), declared a terrorist organization in 1952 and [Jomo Kenyatta](#) arrested, released in 1961, and president in 1964); Zimbabwe ([Mugabe](#) arrested in 1964, elected prime minister in 1980). Such figures suggest an average "pre-dialogue learning period" of 18 years -- notably for the UK government. It is therefore understandable that it is being suggested that the "global war against terrorism" will last one or more decades. The same non-dialogue mindset is calling the shots -- or rather evoking them.

From this perspective, any independence process in recognition of human rights might be usefully recognized as a "terrorist laundering" process -- a concept that might encourage "Washington" to live up to its name. It is just a question of the price the Coalition of the Willing is prepared to pay in innocent human lives to stave off the moment of historical recall. *Who benefits* from avoiding dialogue for as long as possible?

Realistic possibilities?

Why not prepare the way with a permanent neutral dialogue zone as a laboratory for lower ranking representatives (*porte-paroles*) of various dramatically opposed perspectives -- an "Oslo process"? The long-term dialogue between North and South Korea in a state of continuing belligerency suggests one model, however unsatisfactory (cf James M. H. Lee, *The Korean Armistice and North-South Dialogue*, 2001). It would be vital that the context was not designed on the assumption that any one position was the right and appropriate one -- or that a particular western style of facilitation was appropriate, or that agreement was the only desirable outcome. There is a need to learn to talk to people who are totally unreasonable from one's preferred perspective (possibly like one's parents, one's teenage children, one's mother in law, or one's noisy neighbour!). What would such research cost -- in comparison to the cost of vainly chasing after terrorists long after they may have blown themselves up? *Who benefits* from avoiding insights that might emerge from such research?

Such dialogue might lead to a more daring initiative following the precedent of the post-apartheid [Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa](#). According to Kevin Avruch and Beatriz Vejarano (*Truth and Reconciliation Commissions: A Review Essay and Annotated Bibliography*, 2002), since 1973, more than 20 "truth commissions" have been established around the world, with the majority (15) created between 1974-1994. Even the exercise of scoping out how this might work between religions would be of value. Given the manner, noted above, in which negotiation with "terrorist" groups is framed as either "impossible" or "inappropriate", it is interesting to note the paper by Eric Brahm (*Truth Commissions*) on a website named [BeyondIntractability.org](#) -- specifically devoted to "information on more constructive approaches to difficult and intractable conflicts" (an Intractable Conflict Knowledge Base Project of the Conflict Research Consortium of the University of Colorado).

Understanding alternative perspectives

As noted by William Dalrymple (*A largely bourgeois endeavour*, *The Guardian*, 20 July 2005):

Of course, we must condemn the horrific atrocities these men cause; but condemnation is not enough. Unless we attempt to understand the *jihadis*, read their statements and honestly analyse what has led these men to blow themselves up, we can never defeat them or even begin to drain the swamp of the grievances in which they continue to flourish.

A credible response is envisaged by David Clark (*This terror will continue until we take Arab grievances seriously*, *The Guardian*, 9 July 2005):

An effective strategy can be developed, but it means turning our attention away from the terrorists and on to the conditions that allow them to recruit and operate. No sustained insurgency can exist in a vacuum. At a minimum, it requires communities where the environment is permissive enough for insurgents to blend in and organise without fear of betrayal.

Obsession with unimaginative intelligence-gathering

Avoiding dialogue and new insight, *who benefits* from Tony Blair's interpretation of this to mean "big brotherly" collection of intelligence on local Muslim communities -- intelligence that could be used abusively for other purposes? (cf Vikram Dodd, *Special Branch to track Muslims across UK*, *The Guardian*, 20 July 2005). Rushing in legislation for more comprehensive identity profiling and installation of thousands of surveillance cameras everywhere -- as the key to effective response to terrorism -- may be especially ironic if the association of "al-Qaida" with a database (as mentioned earlier) is confirmed.

As was perhaps originally intended, the final result of the "war on terrorism" may then be the online recording of whole populations in a database. "Al-Qaida" may then turn out to have been the codename for an exercise in control -- the ultimate worldwide expression of [anal](#)

[retentiveness](#) by fundamentalists.

Exemplification of wider patterns of inadequacy

There is a curious irony to the parallel between the challenge of "dialogue with terrorists" and of "dialogue with polluters" (in relation to climate change). Tony Blair was quoted at the G8 as saying:

My fear is that if we do not bring the US into the consensus on tackling climate change, we will never ensure the huge emerging economies, particularly China and India, are part of a dialogue... If we do not have the US, India and China as part of that dialogue, there is no possibility of succeeding in resolving this issue. [\[more\]](#)

To the extent that "al-Qaida" can be usefully understood as a label for humanity's "collective unconscious" -- or that of a dominant segment of industrialized society -- it would seem that rejection of any form of dialogue should be interpreted as a failure of the "consciousness" of humanity to come to terms with that which it suppresses. From a psychoanalytical perspective, the failure of consciousness to "get the message", or even to acknowledge the legitimacy of the message, can only result in the escalation of the "irrational" violence that the "unconscious" will imaginatively continue to inflict on the "conscious". For humanity, seeking to win a "war" against its shadow is not a fruitful undertaking (cf *Attacking the Shadow through Iraq*, 2002).



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