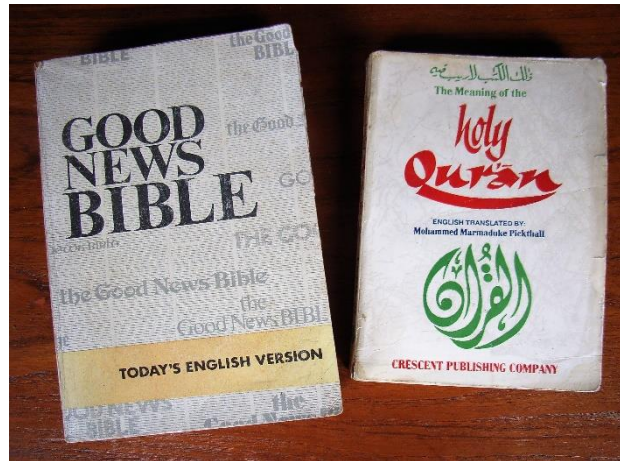


A Christian Response to Islamic Terrorism



Some years ago, Australians didn't often think about Muslims, apart from the 'Afghan' cameleers who serviced central Australia in the 19th century, and the hospitable Turks each Anzac Day, but the recent actions of Islamic State terrorists have changed this. The random killing of civilians in Europe, Britain, USA, Afghanistan, Iraq, Australia and many other countries, often by individuals and small groups who claim to kill and die for Islamic State, have spread fear and anxiety in our world. The perpetrators see themselves as martyrs and heroes acting in the name of Allah, but many Muslims refuse to link such acts to Allah.

In the past, religious beliefs, at times associated with politics, have been identified as responsible for wars and violence. Christians in the Middle Ages went on Crusades to fight against Muslims and re-capture the Holy Land, and during the late 20th century, in Northern Ireland, Christians fought against other Christians. Today, we in Australia can be tempted to blame Islam for our uneasy climate, and suspect all Muslims of being terrorists or potential terrorists, although often in attacks innocent Muslims are killed alongside non-Muslims.

This distrust has sometimes led to the customs and beliefs of Muslims being criticised by Christians, and judged 'not Australian'. Muslim men who prostrate themselves in

prayer, and women who often, but not always, cover their heads and wear long dresses look alien to us. Actually these actions are also found among some Christians. I have worshipped in India with Christian Syrian Orthodox sisters who, at least in Lent, regularly prostrate their bodies in prayer. If we go back to the 1950s, sisters/nuns in Anglican and Roman Catholic Religious Orders usually wore long black habits, and veils covering their heads. But they were not regarded as 'veiled threats'.

And what about the faith of Muslims? Some Muslims and Christians agree that Allah is the one God worshipped by Jews, Christians and Muslims. Other Christians and Muslims disagree, partly because of different understandings of the Christian concept of a Trinitarian God.

When we read the Qur'an and the Bible, we discover both differences and similarities. The Qur'an begins with The Opening: (*English translation by Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall*) "Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds, The Beneficent, the Merciful. Owner of the Day of Judgment, Thee (alone) we worship." And in chapter 36: "(Show) kindness unto parents, and unto near kindred, and orphans, and the needy, and unto the neighbour who is kin (unto you) and the neighbour who is not of kin, and the fellow-traveller..." In the Hadith, a holy book for Muslims, Mohammed writes, "None of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself." (67-1, Hadith no. 45.)

Although Christians and Muslims may understand these descriptions of God and how to behave towards others differently, it is difficult to connect them to the hatred and violence shown by Islamic terrorists. Instead, they sound to me more like Jesus' words in Luke 6:36 (*NRSV*), "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful". And in Matthew 22:37-39 (*NRSV*): "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul... You shall love your neighbour as yourself".

As Christians, we might wish to remove or ignore the differences of the Muslim faith, but differences, such as Jesus recognised only as a prophet, can sometimes enrich our own faith. For example, rather than using the name of Jesus carelessly or as a swear word, Muslims follow the saying of 'Jesus' with the phrase, 'peace be upon him'. When I hear this I am momentarily stopped, and silently reverence Jesus myself.

The violent acts of Islamic extremists are evil and can cause us to fear all Muslims. Such fear encourages laws preventing Muslims from entering our country and sending back some of those already here. But what about Jesus' command for us to

love our neighbour? Are not Muslims our neighbours? Are we being controlled by fear or God's love? In 1 John 4:18 (NRSV) we read, "perfect love casts out fear". To change from fear and hate, to love and compassion can seem an idealistic and impossible goal. How would we feel if someone we knew was killed by terrorists? Could we obey Jesus' challenging words, "Love your enemies" in Matthew 5:44 (NRSV)? Only, I believe, with the help of a loving, crucified and risen God.

In the gospel accounts, Jesus lovingly related to Jews and Gentiles. A Gentile woman who pestered Jesus was treated with respect and received what she desired. At his crucifixion Jesus prayed to his Father to forgive the Roman soldiers hammering in the nails.

Following Jesus Christ, calls us to witness to God's love for all. We shall at times struggle and fail, but let us be assured that in the end God's love, which gives life to all creation, human (including terrorists) and non-human, will triumph.

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(December 2015, Revised, June 2017)*