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Lecture 3

Terrorism and Toleration

In the first lecture I took Mark Jurgensmeyer's question as the central question of this lecture series as a whole. To recall, Jurgensmeyer says 'Perhaps the first question that came to mind when televisions around the world displayed the extraordinary aerial attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on September 11th 2001 was why anyone would do such a thing. When it became clear that the perpetrators' motivations were couched in religious terms, the shock turned to anger. How could religion be related to such violent acts?' (Jurgensmeyer, 2000, p. xi).

In that first lecture I suggested that religion can be related to violent acts when the religion in question is salvationist. For salvationist religious believers, what matters is life everlasting and if life everlasting depends on having the right beliefs, then (it seems) we must do whatever is necessary to ensure that people do have the right beliefs, and sometimes that will require intolerance and coercion, for what is suffering on this earth by comparison with happiness in eternity?

However, in the second lecture, I tried to explain how, in 17th century Europe, religious intolerance and persecution gradually gave way to peaceful co-existence: despite appearances to the contrary, religious belief (including salvationist religious belief) can be compatible with toleration and some of the most powerful arguments for religious toleration - the arguments presented by John Locke in his *Letter Concerning Toleration* - are arguments which speak directly to salvationist religious

believers and aim to show them why, from their own religious perspective, they should extend toleration to others.

However, modern defences of toleration do not, on the whole, adopt Locke's strategy in their defences of religious toleration. That is to say, they do not appeal to religious belief in order to ground and motivate religious toleration, but look elsewhere for its justification. In this lecture, I examine the strategies adopted by modern political philosophers and explain how they differ from the strategy adopted by Locke. Having done that, I then consider the possibility that Locke's strategy is no longer appropriate because, unlike Locke, we confront not only religious intolerance and religious violence, but religious terrorism. And terrorism, it is said, is different. Moreover, all this is preliminary to a discussion, in the final lecture, of the ways in which we might better understand and respond to the religiously motivated violence that disfigures our world. I begin, however, with modern understandings and interpretations of religious violence.

Modern Accounts of Religious Violence

As was noted earlier, modern commentaries on terrorism in general, and on 9/11 in particular, tend to shy away from any interpretation of it as centrally religious and to interpret it as either political and strategic, or as a manifestation of an irrational psychopathology. As an example of the former, I will discuss Robert Goodin's account, as given in his recent book, *What's Wrong with Terrorism?*, and as an example of the latter, I will discuss Michael Ignatieff's account in his book, *The Lesser Evil*. Goodin first.

Goodin writes: ‘I am going to be arguing here that terrorism is best understood, not as a psychopathology or as an ideology but, rather, as a distinctive political tactic the essence of which lies in its attempt to frighten people for political advantage. I thus propose to put “terror” – or anyway the attempt to terrorize – back at the heart of our analysis of “terrorism”: what is morally distinctive about it and what is morally wrong with it’ (Goodin, 2006, p.31).

There are two significant features of the definition offered by Goodin: first its insistence on the political; second its insistence on the centrality of terror. I take no exception to the second. It does seem sensible to insist that an account of terrorism should give centrality to the concept of terror. I do, however, take exception to the former – to the claim that terrorism is, in essence, a ‘political tactic’. In making this claim, Goodin of course sets himself apart from those who see religious terrorism as ‘of a different character’ from ideologically motivated terrorism, or strategically motivated terrorism. Thus, he sets himself apart from Bruce Hoffman who, in the analysis offered by the RAND Corporation, and referred to in the previous lecture, makes much of the fact that religiously motivated acts of terrorism are distinct and different from ideologically motivated ones.

Goodin thinks it sometimes is true that terrorist acts are motivated by religious convictions, but he nonetheless insists that ‘in a sense, terrorist *goals* are always political, as extremists driven by religious or ideological beliefs usually seek political power to compel society to conform to their views’ (Goodin, 2006, p.44, emphasis added). And he cites the events of 9/11 in defence of this analysis when he writes: ‘note well that the most famous recent instance of fundamentalist terrorism - the September 11 attacks on the US – was explicitly political in its aims. Osama bin Laden’s announced aims were of a highly socio-political sort: the removal of infidel

troops from the holy lands of Saudi Arabia, and so on. (Goodin, 2006, p.44). In short, and for Goodin, terrorism is, at root, 'always political' in its aims whatever its motivational origins. To be sure, political aims can be fed by religious motivation, but it is the political aims that really matter.

Michael Ignatieff takes a different view. In his book, *The Lesser Evil*, he makes much of the fact (as he sees it) that, while most terrorist activity in the 20th century was politically or ideologically motivated, the late 20th and early 21st centuries have seen the rise of a different kind of terrorism - religiously motivated terrorism, and this kind of terrorism is, he thinks, fundamentally irrational. He writes:

Immortality complicates the relationship between violent means and political ends, for the promise of eternal life has the effect of making it a secondary matter [to the terrorist] whether or not the act achieves anything political at all. What matters most is securing entry to Paradise. Here, political violence becomes subservient not to a political end, but to a personal one. Once violent means cease to serve determinate political ends, they take on a life of their own. When personal immortality becomes the goal, the terrorists cease to think like political actors, *susceptible to rational calculation of effect*, and begin to act like fanatics. (Ignatieff, 2004, p.124, emphasis added)

And he concludes:

It is a mistake to view Al Qaeda's assassins as warriors in the cause of freedom for Palestinians and humiliated Muslims around the world. The reality is otherwise: their goals are less political than apocalyptic.... goals that

are political can be engaged politically. Apocalyptic goals, on the other hand, are impossible to negotiate with. They can only be fought by force of arms. (Ignatieff, 2004, pp. 125-126)

So where Goodin emphasises the distinctively political character of modern terrorist acts, Ignatieff emphasises their distinctively religious character. What matters for Goodin is that the 9/11 bombers have political ends in view; what matters for Ignatieff is that the 9/11 bombers are religiously inspired. However, although Goodin and Ignatieff have very different understandings of religiously motivated acts of terrorism – as evidenced by their different diagnoses of 9/11, they do nonetheless seem to share an assumption, which is that if we want to make sense of these actions, then we must understand them as political or strategic. If they cannot be understood in that way then, on the face of things at least, they are irrational, or apocalyptic, or blind, or fanatical.

Ignatieff's position on this is clearest and (I think) most alarming. Twice in the passages quoted above he strongly implies that what is not political – by which he seems to mean 'strategic', or influenced by considerations of outcomes (broadly instrumental) – is not rational. So, in the first quotation, he explicitly links the abandonment of 'political' thinking with the abandonment of rationality: 'when personal immortality becomes the goal' he says 'terrorists cease to think like political actors, *susceptible to rational calculation of effect*, and begin to act like fanatics'. On the assumption that this is not a claim born of deep psychological insight into the actual temperaments of terrorists, it is presumably a claim to the effect that ceasing to calculate effects is in and of itself ceasing to act rationally – an example of fanaticism.

In the second quotation, he takes a further step when he claims that, since what he refers to as ‘apocalyptic’ goals are inaccessible to negotiation, they ‘can only be fought by force of arms’. This strikes me as yet more alarming: where the first quotation simply implies that the only kind of rationality is instrumental rationality, the second quotation asserts that when people refuse to engage in instrumental rationality, they must, be met ‘by force of arms’. Either way, what is not strategic is irrational.

I want to pause here because the implications of Ignatieff’s claims go far beyond their application to religiously-motivated violence. So let’s first think of what these claims amount to, not in relation to religion, but more generally. As noted, Ignatieff makes two distinct claims in the two quotations given: the first is that, by ceasing to think in terms of effect - or outcome - religious believers cease to act rationally and begin to act like fanatics. The second is that when they cease to think in terms of outcome they must be met by force of arms.

Now, on the first, I would simply note that there are many contexts in which individuals do not think of their actions in terms of outcomes but where their behaviour is nonetheless perfectly rational. Giving presents, for instance, is not outcome-oriented. It is done in order to express one’s feelings rather than in order to secure a result. Thus, I give my husband a birthday present not, or nor primarily, because I think he needs the thing I have bought for him, but rather as an expression of my love and affection. Similarly, when invited to a dinner party, I take a bottle of wine not because I think my host needs the bottle of wine, but simply to express my appreciation of her hospitality. Or – more gloomily – I attend memorial services for those who have died not because I think it will ‘make any difference’ but as an expression of my sadness and as a mark of respect for the person who has died. In

none of these cases is my behaviour directed towards the attainment of a particular result, but in none of these cases is my behaviour irrational.

Moreover, it is not only expressive acts that are ruled out by Ignatieff's account, but also rituals and symbolic acts more generally. Here is a story told by Richard Wollheim in his Leslie Stephen Lecture of 1979.

In the third book of the *Analecets* of Confucius we read of the Master teaching a return to the purity and sincerity of the ancient ceremonies. He deploras superstition and the mere outward observance of forms. Then Tzu-Kung, one of the disciples, asks about the monthly ceremony at which the new moon is announced to the Ancestors. Would it not be better, he queries, if the practice of sacrificing a sheep were done away with? Confucius reproves him gently. He calls him by his familiar name. 'Ssu' he says, 'You care for the sheep. I care for the ceremony. (Wollheim, 1979, p.1)

We may or may not think that the sacrifice of the sheep is a price worth paying in order to preserve the ritual. What we must acknowledge, however, is that the sacrifice of the sheep is not the same as simple, cold-blooded, slaughter, and this is in no small part because sacrifice has (or may have) a value that is not instrumental but symbolic¹. Moreover, although in this case observing the ritual requires the death of an animal, that is not always so, nor should it disguise from us the fact that we all understand – and value – ritual even though it is quite at odds with the sort of instrumental reasoning that Ignatieff seems to think criterial for rationality.

¹ As Wollheim puts it, 'if I, after this lecture, were to cry off the dinner to which I have been invited, and go out into the fens, and buy a sheep, tie it up, and hack it to death, that action, so far from endowing my life with meaning, would be a senseless piece of butchery'.

I raise these points simply because it is important to note that ceasing to think in terms of outcomes is neither the mark of irrationality nor the preserve of the religious. On the contrary, expressive and symbolic acts are extremely important to most of us, and most of us would (I think) defend them as rational even though they do not emphasise ‘effect’ or have any discernible ‘pay off’. I am therefore deeply sceptical about the move Ignatieff makes when he says that ‘when the terrorists cease to think like political actors, *susceptible to rational calculation of effect*, they begin to act like fanatics’, for insofar as they are not always motivated by means-end rationality, they are no different from the rest of us. It isn’t that that makes them fanatical. I will return to this point at the end of the lecture because there is still a bit more to be said about it and, in particular, I am conscious that I have not mentioned the ‘apocalyptic’ dimension of Ignatieff’s analysis.

So far, then, my concern with Ignatieff’s account is that it implies that terrorist acts, when religiously motivated, are irrational because they do not take account of outcome. Against this I have noted that many acts are not ‘outcome-oriented’, many acts have a ritual or symbolic or expressive significance, but we do not deem them to be irrational for that reason. So Ignatieff’s strategy for understanding religiously motivated violence seems to me to bespeak a rather narrow view of rationality and a failure to recognise the wide variety of actions which we might deem rational.

What, then, of the second modern strategy for understanding religious violence? What of Goodin’s claim that the actions perpetrated on 9/11 are, ultimately, political and strategic? The first thing to be said here is that Goodin has some empirical evidence on his side. In his book, *Dying to Win*, Robert Pape argues, on the basis of extensive empirical research, that suicide bombers have determinate political and strategic aims. Rejecting analyses in terms of an ‘evil ideology called Islamic

fundamentalism' (an analysis reminiscent of Ignatieff's), Pape insists that suicide bombers are in fact motivated by 'a simple strategic goal: to compel the United States and its Western allies to withdraw combat forces from the Arabian Peninsula and other Muslim countries' (Pape, 2005, p.vi). And this, of course, both echoes and endorses Goodin's claim that, at root, the actions of religious terrorists are political. They aim at a distinct and identifiable political end.

Nonetheless, I don't find this account completely satisfying. The concern I have about Goodin's analysis is that it assumes, without argument, that there is a clear and uncontested area called 'the political', and that it is within that area that suicide bombers and other terrorists act, but there are at least two reasons for thinking that this assumption is false. The first reason takes us back to John Locke; the second reason takes us back to John Bunyan.

Recall that Locke's defence of toleration was a defence that took as its target those (many) religious believers who thought that the magistrate had both a right and a duty to enforce orthodox religion. What Locke needed to show was that certain matters (the enforcement of religious belief) were not within the jurisdiction of the magistrate. They were religious and not political – the business of the priest and not of the magistrate. And he also needed to show that there were other matters which, while of religious significance, were essentially political. They were the business of the magistrate and not of the priest. But Locke needed to argue for these claims because, as has been pointed out in previous lectures, a significant part of the dispute in 17th century Europe was a dispute about what was or was not within the realm of the political. The point I want to make here is simply that, in attempting to understand the actions of terrorists and in insisting that their behaviour is political, we should bear in mind that it may be question-begging to assume that we all know what counts as

political, and that we all agree on what the scope of the political is. Often, disputes between different sorts of religious believers, and between religious believers and the secular are, at root, disputes about what is political and what is not.

Beyond that, however, and even if there is agreement about the scope of the political, there may be disagreement about whether any particular action is political or whether it is religious. Indeed, this was precisely what the case of John Bunyan revealed. To recall, in 1661 Bunyan was arrested and imprisoned for preaching without a licence. His first period of imprisonment was 3 months, but when he refused to undertake to stop preaching, he was returned to Bedford gaol where he spent a total of 12 years. Christopher Hill comments:

When Bunyan faced the Bedfordshire justices in 1661, he thought he was refusing to give up his God-given vocation of preaching: they thought he was a dangerous agitator who was stirring up class hostility in the very delicate situation of post-Restoration England, just recovering from a revolution in which the revolutionaries had spoken on behalf of the poor, as Bunyan did ... The Bedfordshire gentry believed it to be their duty to prevent disorder, and in particular to prevent any revival of the revolutionary activities of the forties and fifties. Bunyan's motives were religious, not political, not revolutionary. Nonetheless, they led him to take actions which the Bedfordshire justices could not but regard as seditious. (pp.31-2). (Hill, 1999, pp. 31-32)

Hill's language is interesting. Having emphasised that Bunyan believed himself to be pursuing a God-given calling, he goes on to note that the Bedfordshire justices '*could not but*' regard his behaviour as seditious (political). Whatever Bunyan's intentions, or

motivation, the classification of his actions by the judges could not be abstracted from its location in and consequences for the wider society.

Two points emerge: first, that the scope of the political is contested and must be argued for, and second that, even when the scope of the political has been agreed upon, it is still the case that actions can admit of different and conflicting interpretations. Goodin's claim is that, whatever their motivation, terrorist actions are always, in essence, political. They aim at political ends. But this is to ignore both the possibility that the scope of the political is itself part of what is at stake in disputes about religious toleration, and the possibility that what is religious from one perspective is political from another. To dramatize, we might ask: was John Bunyan really doing God's bidding, or was he really whipping up social and political unrest? It is not clear to me that there is a single right answer to these questions, and I am inclined to say the same about some modern terrorist acts. Perhaps here, too, they believe themselves to be doing the will of God; we cannot but see their actions as political and seditious.

The overall point of this discussion is to note that, historically, problems of religious intolerance were alleviated when religious believers themselves were given reasons from within their religion for recognising the scope of politics. However, in modern discussions, the scope of the political is simply assumed; it is rarely argued for. When this happens, it is not only the case that religious believers themselves are, or may be, 'saddled' with a conception of the political which they do not accept; it is also the case that their actions may be misunderstood. In particular, and as I hope the discussion of Ignatieff and Goodin has shown, there appears to be no room for an understanding of their actions as both religious and rational. If they are rational, then (at root) they are not religious (this seems to be Goodin's view); and if they are

religious, then (at root) they are not rational (this seems to be Ignatieff's view). What is needed, however, is the possibility of action which is both religiously motivated and rational. One possibility which I have hinted at here, and which I will develop a bit more in the next section, is that we might better understand religious violence if we were to adopt a more expansive concept of rationality – one that includes not only strategic or instrumental rationality, but also 'expressive' and symbolic rationality.

It is at this point, however, that I must face 'head on' the fact that, in the modern world, we are not dealing simply with religious intolerance, or religious persecution, or even religious violence. Whatever the lessons of Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* and whatever the interest of comparisons with John Bunyan, in the end, we are not dealing with tinkers and preachers wondering around the English countryside offering politically mischievous sermons on the gospel according to St Matthew. We are dealing with people who are willing to blow up large parts of New York City and extensive sections of the London transport system. What is more, they are willing to blow themselves up in the process. In short, then, we are not dealing with religious violence anymore, we are dealing with religious terrorism. So, what difference does that fact make? What, if anything, is special about terrorism and about religiously motivated terrorism?

What's Special about Terrorism?

Obviously, if we want to know what, if anything, is special about terrorism, we first need to know what terrorism is. This, in itself, is a considerable challenge. In her book, *Terror in the Name of God*, Jessica Stern notes the 'hundreds' of definitions of

terrorism 'on offer' but concludes that, in the end, there are only two characteristics necessary to distinguish it from other acts of violence: first, that it is aimed at non-combatants (this distinguishes it from warfare); and second that 'terrorists use violence *for dramatic purpose*: instilling fear in the target audience is often more important than the physical result' she says, and she goes on to conclude that 'this deliberate creation of dread is what distinguishes terrorism from simple murder or assault' (Stern, 2003, p.xx).

Stern is not alone in insisting that the attempt to instil fear is a defining feature of terrorism. Goodin, too, makes fear central, though of course he insists that, in terrorist acts, the fear is generated for political advantage. And Samuel Scheffler similarly argues that standard cases of terrorism display the following minimum features: '(i) the use of violence against civilians or non-combatants (ii) the intention that this use of violence should create fear in others, including other civilians and non-combatants, and (iii) the further intention that this fear should destabilize or degrade an existing social order or, at any rate, that it should raise the spectre of such destabilization or degradation' (Scheffler, 2006, p.6).

So there seems to be consensus that terrorism is a matter of instilling fear, though there is also some difference of opinion about whether that is, or must be, done in an attempt to secure political advantage, or whether it can be done for some other reason (for instance, Stern's claim that it may be done 'for dramatic purpose' or Ignatieff's claim that sometimes it is done in disregard of any ends it might achieve). What, then, is special about terrorism understood as the attempt to instil fear? Why, if at all, is it different from, and worse than, other kinds of violence?

Bernard Williams once remarked that, when addressing moral and political problems, philosophers have a tendency to be either under-embarrassed or over-

embarrassed. This, it seems to me, is the case with philosophical discussions of terrorism: some, especially post 9/11, are over-embarrassed and reach for the vocabulary of Apocalypse and Armageddon. Indeed, and as I noted earlier, this is the vocabulary favoured by Ignatieff. Others, equally over-embarrassed in my view, reach for their copy of Hobbes' *Leviathan*, usually as a way of defending the thought that, on 9/11, 'the world changed'. Benjamin Barber is a good example of this. He writes:

In binding us to our own fear ... the terrorists have, in a sense, undone the social contract, bringing us full circle back to a kind of "state of nature". For the last 400 years, we travelled a road from anarchy, insecurity, and fear (the state of nature postulated by social contract theorists like Locke and Hobbes) to law and order (lawful order), political safety and the enjoyment of civil liberty. Operating outside the law, making insecurity ubiquitous and turning liberty into risk, terrorism pushes us backwards into a quasi-anarchy. (Barber, 2003, pp. 75-76)

This, it seems to me, is both hyperbolic and false. We simply do not live in a state of quasi-anarchy, much less in a Hobbesian state of nature. Hobbes's state of nature is a state without government or civil society, and it is a state in which we therefore lack protection from our fellows and in which everyone is my enemy. This is quite simply not the world we are in. We do have government, we do have civil society, and we do not have a 'war of all against all'.

Having said that, however, it is equally true that terrorist acts are indeed of a peculiarly alarming and (as the word implies) terrifying kind. And if Barber is inclined to be over-embarrassed about this, there are those who are inclined to be

under-embarrassed. I would count Goodin amongst these: by insisting on the essentially political and strategic character of terrorism, he ignores the possibility that terrorist acts are also (and perhaps primarily) acts of expressive or symbolic significance, and that their terrifying nature is partly attributable to that fact. In saying this, I am not concurring with Ignatieff's thought that, insofar as these acts are not governed by means-end rationality, they are irrational. I have already said that I don't believe that it is the refusal to engage in means-end thinking that makes terrorists either irrational or especially frightening. What makes them especially frightening, in my view, is the possibility that their acts are indeed expressive, and that they are expressive of contempt for both the culture and the values of western liberal democracies. Let me try to explain. At the end of *Terror in the Name of God* Jessica Stern writes: 'the terrorism we currently face is not only a response to political grievances, as was common in the 1960s and 1970s, and which might, in principle, be remediable. It is a response to the "God-shaped hole" in modern culture, and to values like tolerance and equal rights for women' (Stern, 2003, p.283).

What Stern is suggesting here (and her suggestion is made on the basis of extensive empirical research) is that some terrorist organisations do not have the kind of political aims that Goodin, Pape, and others emphasise: removing infidel troops from the holy lands of Saudi Arabia, for instance. Their acts are not political in that way, but are, at root, expressive of their deep contempt for the values of western liberal democracies. If this is true, or even partly true, then it is indeed terrifying since, on this account, the object of attack is not a particular political regime, nor yet a particular set of political actions (it is not George W. Bush, nor is it the occupation of the lands of Saudi Arabia). The object of attack is a way of life – our way of life, and the object of attack is a set of values – our values. This is terrifying because, as Stern

hints, it is not – or not clearly – remediable. If the objection is to the existence of liberal democratic values, then the only way the objection can be met is if we abandon those values, but abandoning those values is, in no small part, ceasing to be what we are - liberal democrats with a commitment to toleration, liberty of conscience, equality of respect, justice, and so on.

All this, however, really does now sound like a version of the Clash of Civilisations thesis. It appears to explain religious terrorism as part of a more general conflict between ‘the West and the Rest’ – a conflict which holds out little hope for mutual understanding or peaceful co-existence. In the fourth, and final, lecture, I will try to show why that, depressing, conclusion is neither the only one nor the best one available to us in a world post 9/11.