

9/11 Ten Years On: A new Religious Settlement?

Gwen Griffith-Dickson

9/11 and the subsequent 7/7 attacks on London put religion at the centre of questions of national security, and the boundaries in Britain between the 'political' and the 'religious' were overthrown. Professor Gwen Griffith-Dickson gives a fascinating insight into the current relationship between the State and Muslim communities in particular. What has been the legacy of the terrorist attacks, in policy and in practice?

London has become a centre for religious extremists, pushing their messages of intolerance and condemnation with no attempt at concealment. Avid gatherings cluster around them, seeming to relish the prospect of violence. An anxious government decides this requires concerted action by the State and new legislation. Ultimately this confrontation will culminate in an attempted terrorist attack designed to bring down the government itself, justified in the name of religion.

Does this lurid portrait depict London in the twenty-first century or the sixteenth?

One of the less-observed comments at this tragic anniversary of the events of 9/11 is that the 'Religious Settlement' – first sought in 1559 by Elizabeth I – has been swept aside, along with our more secular assumptions about religion keeping in its place and politics leaving it alone. But perhaps in Britain it was ever thus; and Elizabeth and her ministers' attempts to curb religious extremism and enforce order, if not peace, did not prevent the attempted 'terrorist' attack, religiously motivated, of 5 November 1605, by a Catholic.

Religions such as Christianity and Islam – and 'revolutionaries' such as Jesus and Muhammad – call for



an absolute commitment to God that relativises every claim to loyalty or obedience made by the secular State. These communities of faith struggle to accommodate their spiritual vision of community to this-world requirements of societies and governance at the best of times. We see this now when issues of social teaching or personal morality become matters of legislation, as in current British disputes over abortion law and the ending of life for the

terminally ill, for example. But once a paramilitary group claims a religious justification for an attack on a modern nation State – as Al-Qa'ida-inspired groups have done – religion, and a subset of 'purely' theological issues, now becomes entwined in questions about law and order, about national security.

This puts religion in a new kind of relationship with government, distinctly different to the separation between the Church, or religion more broadly, and the State that we had come to expect in Britain, led partly by an American example.

How might the world, and history, have looked had the FBI treated 9/11 as a 'crime', as they did the previous attack on the World Trade Centre? Suspects and perpetrators would be treated as criminals, not as enemies in a war or as representatives of a religion. The investigation would have focused on patterns of

behaviour and networks of associates. But when the focus of a global response is on a dangerous 'ideology', it is ideas – and in this context, *religious* beliefs and theologies – that become the focus of investigation for a State institution.

For those of us on the frontline over the last few years, this has yielded almost comic moments as we have watched civil servants and police struggle with the complexities of Islamic history, theology, political theory; attempting to fit the subjects of their investigations into their more familiar categories of 'good guys' and 'bad guys', or place them on one side of the divide of partnership material vs. suspects. Islamic denominations and schools of thought were quickly cast into their roles, and thereafter typecast: Sufis were the good guys; Salafis and Islamists the bad guys. I remember one woman even asking me what I thought about the 'Salufis', who sounded more like a competitor at Crufts than a global threat.

The Blair government took the route of deploying Muslim communities themselves in the struggle against terrorism. At its best, often in the hands of the more sensitive and experienced police officers, this would exemplify a tenet held by counter-terrorist professionals: 'It is communities who defeat terrorism.' At its more soundbite-grabbing, it yielded ministers complaining that Muslim communities 'weren't doing enough' and deploring these perversions of Islam which is 'really a religion of peace'. A two-way act of delegation of responsibilities seemed to take place, as government ministers pronounced on Islamic belief and untrained civilians were supposed to function as frontline counter-terrorist practitioners.

In Britain this drive to address the deeper causes of terrorism, rather than simply police criminal violent acts, resulted in one of the four strands in CONTEST, the counter-terrorism strategy: 'Prevent' (the others are Pursue, Prepare and Protect).

The concept of 'Prevent' rests, in a way, on the old adage that prevention is better than cure; by analogy with health or educational problems, then, early intervention is desirable. How much more so if what is at stake is the mass slaughter of innocent people? With early detection and intervention in illness or learning difficulties, the worst that can result from a false diagnosis is a waste of resources. Prevention of

crime, similarly, is unproblematic insofar as it consists in 'target hardening': making properties, people, situations less vulnerable to attack. But what happens when the crime is seen as religiously- or politically-motivated? Now 'prevention' entails the scrutiny of religious and/or political views, to provide early detection for when they have become 'unacceptable'. This has a strikingly different impact on questions of civil liberties and human rights. In short: we propose citizens become the subject of State-sponsored interventions for holding religious and political beliefs – something that is not only legal, but that we also believe generally to be a human right. Whether this proactive policy strikes you as prudent or offensive marks out which side of the ideological divide you stand on.

Needless to say, it has created years of contention. This particular question has been overlaid with another terrain of legitimate disagreement: on the actual causes, or 'vulnerabilities' in the intervention jargon, of 'violent extremism' (the newly-coined term in the New Labour years). Ordinary academic and scientific disputes can be vitriolic enough; but here the various purported causes were laden with political and religious ramifications, which often could not be stated honestly. Suggestions that these troubles could be attributed to social exclusion, disadvantage and experiences of racism invoked familiar left-right debates – which we have seen revived recently as politicians sought explanations for the summer riots. Other explanations pointed to 'foreign policy'; this, however, was rejected not only by defensive government ministers but was also read as a code for 'the West's support of Israel', which involved a further set of highly neuralgic interreligious dynamics as painful, usually unspoken Jewish-Muslim fears and resentments were triggered afresh. Meanwhile, what reactions are aroused if the blame for extremism is set upon the religious beliefs pure and simple: or indeed, upon Islam itself?

Even Muslims themselves were divided on this question. While most would seek to defend their faith against the allegations that Islam itself had gone septic, others did point to specific currents or practices within the faith. But which Muslims are the problem and which are the solution? Fingers pointed in opposite directions; and one of the most distinctive characteristics of the UK scene in the last five years has been this very battle. To many observers (and most partici-

pants) it was impossible not to see the settling of old, inter-denominational scores at work as each found proof, at last, of why the opposed school of thought was so wrong-headed and even dangerous. And once you reckon that millions of pounds have been on offer to Muslim groups or practitioners who claim to be able to address the problems, it became inevitable that accusations of self-interest were inescapable.

As huge sums were invested in 'engagement' with Muslim communities, the unspoken cross-currents in this choppy sea were treacherous to navigate for secular civil servants with no background in religion or Islam. For this was not only a time when intra-religious disputes became politicised and projected onto the national scene; party politics too were injected into 'Prevent' as parties found new vulnerabilities in their opponents. Paranoia seized government departments at the thought that they had partnered with the wrong Muslims and might find themselves the victims of a screaming tabloid headline for funding extremists or partnering with people who were alleged to have terrorist sympathies or even links.

Serious operational questions underlie these disputes. For the police and government departments, who are still wedded in theory to the nostrum that communities defeat terrorism and community engagement is essential, the question of partnership remains a vital one. The only UK case of a terrorist attack being prevented by community intelligence came about following a community-created and mediated project delivered and funded by the police ('Operation Nicole', designed and delivered by the Lokahi Foundation and run by the Association of Chief Police Officers). Ideally, such questions are matters that could be decided on the basis of meticulous research and a bank of evidence to confirm what works. Yet virtually no reliable research has been done to address the question of the benefits of community partnership and which methods of intervention work best. Instead, different camps have developed and promulgated their theories, and once more it has become the subject of ideological and even party-political disputes. At one end stand Policy Exchange, Michael Gove, Melanie Phillips and others; at the other, speaking from an operational perspective, stands counter-terrorism expert, Robert Lambert, formerly of the Special Branch and now an academic replete with a PhD in this area. His position (recently dubbed, aggressively, as 'Lamber-

tism') is that those labelled 'Islamist' and 'Salafi' are the ones with the local knowledge and street credibility to enable them to be effective opponents of violent extremism. (He has just published his version this month: Robert Lambert, *Countering al-Qaida in London: Police and Muslims in Partnership*, [London: Hurst; 2011].)

Eventually there was a parliamentary review of 'Prevent' and the Coalition came into government determined to clean the Augean stables of New Labour's 'Prevent' strategy. But this new regime, too, was already ideologically split, and not simply between Tories and Lib Dems. The Conservative Party itself already encompassed the entire spectrum of approaches to matters of security: from those with a more aggressive, 'hawk'-like orientation, for whom a religion and its members were seen as a site for investigation and an object of suspicion; to the 'doves', who favour dialogue and a more consultative approach. However, the more hawk-like new ministers found themselves in confrontation with civil servants who, after several years of experience, felt a degree of certainty on how best to handle the domestic situation. The ensuing document on the new Prevent, to my eyes at least, is a conflation of diverging approaches.

For those concerned about the relations between religions and the State, one of the most significant signals of the direction in which such relations are headed is a new shift, which might seem innocuous or even purely linguistic: the target is no longer 'violent extremism', but simply 'extremism'. Thus religious views deemed by government to be 'extreme', not in keeping with 'British values', are now in the cross-hairs. These British values remain largely undefined; public documents refer to democracy, tolerance, and the rule of law. On the ground, however, Muslim and community-run projects tacitly are scrutinised for their views on issues such as the place of women, homosexuality and the validity of other religions. Those that are 'socially conservative' (denominational terms are now avoided) have found their funding cut. Once more: whether you feel this is correct or a violation of civil liberties will mark out your stance on a legitimately divided issue. One question that might arise for all of us is how we would feel if orthodox Jews and evangelical Christians (or conservative Catholics) were found to be unsuitable partners for government if, for example, they feel homosexuality is unaccept-

able. The Catholic community found themselves in this position over the issue of adoption agencies; it is sobering to imagine the impact of their reaction if it were to have had repercussions for national security and loyalty to Britain, as in the sixteenth century.

The pragmatic question for the counter-terrorist practitioners, such as the police, remains: what is most effective? And new tensions arise now between government departments and those delivering counter-terrorist policies on the ground, who increasingly call for 'operational independence' from the political drivers of government. Over the last few years more than a few senior police officers have spoken to me on the quiet about their unease at counter-terrorism becoming 'counter-subversion': action taken against subversive, dissenting political or religious views.

At the same time there is a widely-accepted rejection of Muslims and Islam itself becoming 'securitised'. 'Securitisation' used to be an arcane word for the manipulation of a financial instrument; now it is a buzz word I heard everywhere in Washington DC as the Obama administration was anxious to say that it did not want to view Muslim communities and relations through a national security lens. The United States has been on a different journey to the UK in the last decade. The aggressive stance of the Bush years has been thoroughly discussed in the media. Now, however, a new attitude is taking hold in government circles; under Obama, and with the appointment in January of former academic, Quintan Wiktorowicz and others, the United States is about to embark on its own version of the drive to work in partnership with Muslim communities, not to demonise or even 'securitise' them. Whether they will avoid the mistakes they have witnessed across the Atlantic (Wiktorowicz spent two years in London studying the UK scene before taking up his new appointment) in their own 'Countering Violent Extremism' programme we do not yet know. What can be predicted confidently is that the polarisation we see in other areas of American politics will have a similar or identical impact in this field: the more the Obama administration puts forward a liberal policy and programme, the more aggressive will be the conservative or right-wing response. Already in the last eighteen months the anti-Muslim rhetoric in the US has grown and become more virulent, exemplified strikingly by the would-be

burning of the Qur'an by a Florida pastor and the so-called 'Ground Zero mosque' protests.

In the rest of Europe a different threat is proving to be the greater preoccupation, well evident at the launch of a new EU network in Brussels last week. In Scandinavia and Germany they are more worried now by the threat of far-right extremism. The greatest threat at the moment is 'the one that we don't see – because it looks like us', as one senior official said to me last week.

And this, too, is part of the legacy of 9/11 and 7/7.

What community members and grass-roots practitioners see is the synergistic relation between the different 'extremisms'. A perfect example is the fracas outside the US Embassy in London on this Sunday's anniversary of 9/11: scuffles between a far-right, anti-Islamic group, the English Defence League, and a vociferous and headline-grabbing (but small and unpopular) Muslim extremist group (the latter is hardly worth naming here as it changes its name every time it is banned.) Meanwhile a 'silent flashmob', organised through Facebook, held up signs protesting against both.

So ten years on in Europe, one legacy of 9/11 is the reconstitution of religion as a political threat – and as a political victim; but in our century the terrorist and victim is Muslim, not Catholic or Jew. In our more secular age, the angry, populist response is not necessarily from an opposing *religious* group, although it has been a popular (secularist) stereotype to portray religions as being at war with one another. Similarly, 'far-right extremist' groups used to be built upon race hate. Now the polarisation is not between religions and the xenophobic aggression of the far-right (they claim) is not about race. Ethnically identified and secular groups (the English Defence League, the British National Party) set themselves against a *religious* minority. And this dynamic, replicated in continental Europe, itself generated the worst terrorist attack on European soil for some years as a Norwegian far-right extremist, influenced by British and American anti-Muslim rhetoric, killed scores of Norwegians as a response to the threat he perceived of Norway falling prey to Muslim terrorists.

What lessons can we learn? The first lesson is actually to *learn* the lessons. Blair's insistence that 9/11 put us in a totally new situation, that the world had changed, seemed to me to be the best way *not* to learn from experience. Operational personnel had already learned the hard way, with the mistakes as well as successes of Northern Ireland; and some of those had also been involved with overcoming the racist group, Combat 18 – which seems a particularly apposite combination of experience. Why declare this valuable experience to be irrelevant because, with Al Qa'ida, 'everything is different'?

The lessons learned from the UK's successes are that communities can defeat terrorism, when they are trusted and empowered to do so. Community engagement and community expertise are vital.

Building trust and maintaining good relationships between communities and the organs of the State is also a secret of success: this is what lay at the heart of the success in preventing the would-be terrorist attack of A. Ibrahim on Bristol. This happens above all through regular, honest and reliable communicating. But creating sustainable communities by healing community divisions – by building trust, committed relationships and honest communication – is the only long-term solution. This is the new 'Religious Settlement' that we need to see between religions, their members and the organs of the State.

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