

BRUSSELS: BACK TO THE FUTURE

5 lessons to prevent this tragedy from becoming a disaster

Brussels was rocked by twin explosions at the Zaventem airport and the Maelbeek metro station on Tuesday morning, 22 March 2016. At least 31 people were killed and more than 200 were injured in the attacks, according to officials. More than sixty people are still in intensive care in local hospitals and the death toll is expected to rise.



The Belga agency said shots were fired and there were shouts in Arabic shortly before the blasts at the airport. Pictures on social media showed smoke rising from the terminal building through shattered windows and passengers running away down a slipway, some still hauling their bags.

The attacks came four days after Salah Abdeslam, the lead suspect wanted in connection with the November Paris attacks, was captured after a lengthy manhunt.

The attacks in Brussels have once again evoked a flood of emotions, sentiments and opinions. Politicians and activists, across Europe and the USA, have not missed this opportunity for political gain. “Turn your sorrow into anger” was a response from an anti-immigrant supporter on the Al Jazeera blog with a multitude of comments following in a similar vein.

The task of the Church, however, is to look beyond the rubble into the future, seeking answers not culprits. It has become far too easy to point fingers and expose the guilty, than it has to look inwards and find solutions. There will be more attacks in the future and there will be more lives lost; there is no debating this. The only question remaining is how the Church will respond to the challenges ahead.

There are 5 issues to consider:

1. FROM TRAGEDY TO DISASTER



The attacks in Brussels was a tragedy, affecting millions of lives in one way or another. For some it was the extreme grief of losing a loved one, while for millions it was the mild inconvenience of changed schedules and renewed security measures. Tragedies are normally recorded in history, while disasters loom in the future. The real tragedy of Brussels could become the disaster of Europe

Every attack, every rumour of an attack and every suspicion of an attacker currently adds to an already heavily polarised European society. Every explosion becomes a building block in the walls of people’s hearts and sadly the divide continues to grow between those who empathise with refugees and those whose fear and suspicion force them to join far-right, anti-immigrant movements.

The reality is that the rise of nationalism will always result in racism. The growth of Europe’s far right movements will have devastating effects on the continent in the future.

Edmund Burke once said that “Those who don’t know history are destined to repeat it.” These words are probably more relevant today than perhaps at any time in our history. The horrors of Europe’s Nazi past were once enough to deter

people from supporting the far-right, but the fear of terrorism and the accompanied dangers of welcoming “strangers” have thrust Europe into a new era where their collective memory is fading.

NEWSWEEK reports that on 13 March, the anti-immigration party *ALTERNATIVE FOR GERMANY*, or **AFD**, made substantial gains in regional elections, marking a dangerous development in European politics. This is not an isolated incident. Earlier this month, the far-right *PEOPLE’S PARTY* made striking electoral gains in Slovakia, and around Europe far-right parties like *JOBBIK* in Hungary, *GOLDEN DAWN* in Greece and Marie le Pen’s *FRONT NATIONAL* in France are gaining in popularity. The *NDP* also won a seat in the European parliament.

The rise of populist reactionary politics is not just a European phenomenon; indeed, the U.S. seems to be falling prey to similar worrying trends, with the fear-mongering, xenophobic rhetoric dominating the Republican primaries.

While the reactionary far-right parties may seem to offer an attractive alternative for some to the political status-quo, ultimately they do not propose constructive solutions and their hateful rhetoric divides people and encourages violence.

From a Christian perspective, the Church cannot afford to be swept along with messages of hatred, fear and suspicion that will lead to more polarisation and less involvement. Christians should address the tragedy and not contribute to the disaster.

2. FROM FEAR TO HATRED



A heightened threat to public safety will lead to hardened hearts and the ultimate victims of future terror attacks will not be Europeans, but the refugees. Fear will lead to further hate-campaigns which will contribute to an unhealthy society, where “anybody different” is viewed with suspicion. Fear always leads to hatred.

After the Paris attacks in November 2015, anti-immigrant movements were quick to erroneously point out that the attacks were perpetrated by refugees. Christians added their voice to these movements and highlighted the dangers of an Islamic agenda where terrorists are sent to Europe disguised as refugees.

The reality is that that the perpetrators of the November attacks in France were mostly European citizens, not recently-arrived refugees. Three of the eight Paris attackers were from Brussels, one was from Egypt, and two were French nationals. Only one was identified as a Syrian refugee who passed through Greece. The

attackers were indeed Muslims with close ties to the Islamic State (IS), but they were NOT refugees.

From a Christian perspective, the Church cannot afford to become messengers of suspicion and creators of hatred. Christians should always seek to be instruments of reconciliation and ambassadors of peace. There needs to be a clear balance between “being a watchman on the wall”, recognising the dangers ahead, but also seeking the souls of individuals and not becoming instruments of division

3. FROM IGNORANCE TO CONSEQUENCE

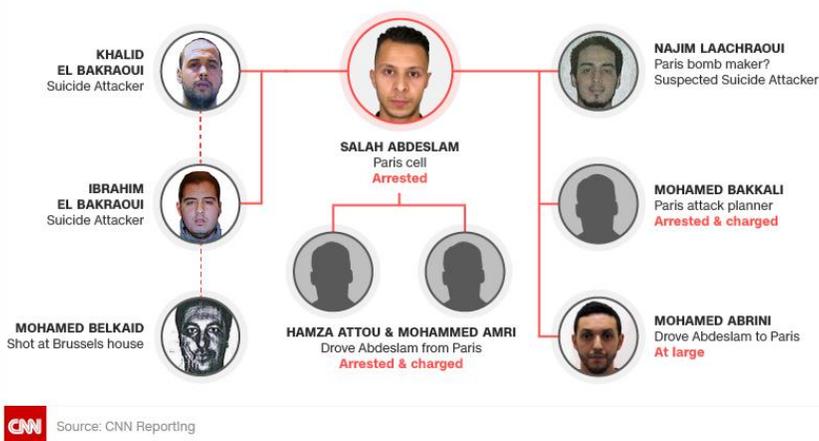
There is no doubt that Islamic State (IS) and similar terror organisations, target marginalised communities in society. It is common knowledge that “you don’t find IS; they find you”, meaning that IS agents will always prey on the side-lined sector of society, for recruitment. The fact that people are willing to join such groups, thus legitimising their existence, is an indictment on society, and especially the church. The devastating evidence of ignoring the needs of marginalised people will eventually be found in the rubble of bombed-out buildings. Suicide bombers are not born, they are made.

True religion, according to scripture, is looking after widows and orphans (*James 1:27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*); feeding the hungry and clothing the naked (*Mat 25:35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in*). Once these commands are ignored, society should not be surprised when the enemy enters the picture and provides violent alternatives.

The current global issue is how to prevent future attacks and how to stop radicals from recruiting young people into a never-ending cycle of violence. Ironically the answer is not as complicated as many leaders make it out to be. Stopping IS is simple, but it will be costly and take time, requiring a transformation in thinking and a major shift in attitude.

From a Christian perspective, unless the Church restores her Biblical duty of finding the marginalised and restoring dignity, there will always be someone else willing to hijack the lives of innocent people.

4. FROM UNDERESTIMATED TO OVER-EXAGGERATED



For many years the political correctness of European politicians has underestimated the real agenda of Islamic extremists. Many European leaders held on to the belief that not all Muslims are radicals and not all radicals are terrorists. But few acknowledged that most terrorist organizations are Islamic in belief and that most acts of violence are justified by their holy scriptures, the Quran.

However, just like underestimation seemed to be the problem in the past, over-exaggeration could be the challenge of the future. In an article on the CNN website on 24 March 2016,

reporters point to the small network of terrorist groups in Europe. They are all brothers, family members or small groups of closely related people. The Brussels attackers were also closely related or linked to the Paris attackers and the network seems minutely small compared to the millions of refugees who have entered the borders of Europe during 2015 and even smaller compared to the total Muslim population of Europe, currently estimated to be around 56 million (excluding Turkey).

The danger of exaggerating these small groups of radical Muslims in Europe is perhaps a bigger threat to stability than the groups themselves. There is no doubt that it only takes one radical to kill a number of people, but the reports should always put it into perspective, emphasizing that these are small groups with limited resources and limited man-power.

From a Christian perspective, balance is always the challenge. The magnitude of the threat should not be measured by the magnitude of the tragedy. Fear and suspicion has a tendency to over-exaggerate a threat. Yes, there needs to be an understanding of the Islamic agenda and there needs to be an awareness of the spiritual battle we are involved in. But the Church cannot afford to judge the majority on the actions of a few.

5. FROM DISAPPROVAL TO DISASSOCIATION

The argument that IS and other terror groups might not be “true Muslims” – as many clerics and Western leaders, including US President Barack Obama, often declare – could well be true, but the fact that Islam provides a platform for almost every terror group in the world today should be acknowledged and addressed.

Most of the clerics who are quick to point out that IS does not represent the true interpretation of Islam are slow to disassociate them with Islamic nations, like Saudi Arabia, who still enforce certain practices which organizations like IS uphold. In 2015, the number of beheadings in Saudi Arabia reached a two-decade high of "at least" 157 and 47 were executed on 2 January 2016. These executions are legitimized on the basis of the same verses in the Quran that IS uses for their 'un-Islamic' beheadings.

From a Christian perspective the Church should be better informed and more equipped to understand the 'true' face of Islam, and whether such a concept even exists. Islam in Europe, widely accepted as secular or moderate Islam, is far removed from Islam in the Middle East. IS rejects the Islam practiced in Europe as being very 'un-Islamic' as much as European Muslims reject the interpretations of IS.

CONCLUSION

It is critically important for Christians to take the lessons of the past to heart and apply Biblical principles that will serve Kingdom purposes in the future. The Church cannot afford to be uninformed neither can the Church afford to rush to judgement and contribute to attitudes that will serve as hindrances in bringing about peace and reconciliation.

SOURCE:

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