

THE SPECTATOR

The Muslim leader who offers an example on how to tackle Islamism

John Jenkins | March 28, 2019



The Christchurch attack has prompted a considerable degree of soul-searching in the West about the potential impact of anti-Muslim rhetoric. The need to tackle deadly far-right conspiracy theories is clear for all to see and the debate about how to do so continues. But what lessons might we learn from the response to Christchurch in the Muslim world, where I spent many years of my professional life working?

Yahya Cholil Staquf, the general secretary of Nahdlatul Ulama – the largest independent Muslim organisation in the world – wrote a good piece in the *Daily Telegraph* this week under the **headline**, “Don’t weaponise the term ‘Islamophobia’”. A week after the terrorist attack in Christchurch, he calls for a better shared understanding of the roots of such violence. He discusses the impact of the Islamist violence of the last 20 years, fuelled by what he describes as ‘obsolete and problematic elements of Islamic orthodoxy that underlie the Islamist worldview’. He also criticises the use of the term ‘Islamophobia’, which he sees as a means of deflecting honest criticism and preventing honest reflection. He suggests that Muslims need to update their understanding of their own tradition before blaming others.

This is pretty remarkable. Most Islamists tend to react extremely defensively when anyone suggests that aspects of their belief systems – for example Islam’s claims to supersede all previous revelations and political traditions, its tolerance of force in spreading and enforcing right belief, Islamism’s totalitarian explanation of the world and the place of humans in it, and its structural subordination of non-Muslims to Muslims – may be part of the problem not the answer.

To do this is not in the slightest to excuse the actions of the Christchurch killer. Yahya Cholil Staquf, like every other reasonable person, thinks the attack was the atrocious result of a murderously self-justifying mindset analogous to that of the Islamic State or Al-Qaeda. It is instead to accept that Muslims – just like the rest of us – have individual agency and can choose how we act and react – and how we interpret our own histories and beliefs.

What has been the reaction of Islamists to this? Occasional denial and mockery, including the assertion that Indonesia (the largest Muslim-majority country on earth) has no right to tell other Muslims what to think, but largely silence. Just as Jacinda Ardern has said she will refuse to name the killer, so Islamists may want to refuse to name their critics. Instead, one chairman at a mosque in New Zealand **suggested** that Mossad and “Zionist business” is to blame for the attack. Hezbollah, the Assad regime, and some compliant Arab journalists have gleefully taken the opportunity to blame all terrorism on the West. And the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation, stimulated by president Erdogan of Turkey, held an emergency summit on Islamophobia – which they interpret as an irrational prejudice against Islam, Muslims and Islamism (as if 9/11, 7/7, the Bataclan massacre and the Islamic State never happened). They also call for an annual day of commemoration, analogous to Holocaust Day, and in effect for new global blasphemy laws. All this they want backed by the authority (such as it is these days) of the UN.

Both the OIC – which has campaigned consistently for blasphemy laws around the world to protect Islam – and the UN – which sponsored the 2001 Durban conference that sought to stigmatise Zionism as racism – have form. Erdogan, of course, has important local elections to fight and has used footage of the mosque massacre at rallies – combined with incendiary language about New Zealand, Australia and the West in general – to inflame his supporters and pose once more as the chief global defender of Islam.

This is certainly a moment for resolving to do even more to combat the rising tide of white supremacist violence around the world. Legal remedies already exist. They can certainly be made more effective through better operational intelligence sharing, policing and education. But above all it is time to keep our collective nerve and reject the sort of divisive, reactionary and identity-based language used by Erdogan, the OIC and those who think that a blanket ban on

what they reserve the right to define as Islamophobia is the answer. As Qanta Ahmed writes in this week's *Spectator*, it would be tragic if we took this Islamist bait.

Instead we should reassert the values of liberal democracy, encourage a franker discussion of what the roots are of terrorisms of all types, and find ways to counter murderous ideologies before they lead to bloodshed. That means speaking about the roots of the discontents of some Muslims and some non-Muslims. It also means honestly acknowledging the problems in our own traditions, not seeking to ban or criminalise criticism. There have been one or two voices in the Arab media who have made thoughtful contributions, by criticising knee-jerk reactions and highlighting the importance of education in accepting the rights of others to be different within the boundaries of the law. Yahya Cholil Staquf has bravely shown us an example. It's just a pity that many others – not least Islamists and their allies – have instead demonstrated that, like the Bourbons, they have forgotten nothing and learned nothing.

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